

The Political Logic of War: How Leadership and Objectives Shape Military Strategy

Політична логіка війни: вплив лідерства та цілей на формування військової стратегії

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Received: January 17, 2026 | Revised: February 1, 2026 | Accepted: February 28, 2026

UDC 355.01:32

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33445/sds.2026.16.1.1>

Purpose. To explain how political leadership shapes the selection and adaptation of fundamental military tactics by examining the cognitive, institutional, and political mechanisms through which political objectives are translated into concrete forms of organized violence.

Method: Comparative analysis, and synthesis.

Findings. The findings show that the selection of fundamental military tactics—annihilation, exhaustion, intimidation, and subversion—is primarily shaped by political objectives rather than by material, structural, or doctrinal factors alone. Political leadership emerges as the central mechanism through which political intent is translated into concrete forms of military force employment. The analysis demonstrates that leaders' cognitive frameworks, institutional constraints, and regime characteristics influence how political goals are converted into organized violence. The proposed typology of strategic logics indicates that each form of force employment corresponds to a specific configuration of political objectives, opponent characteristics, time horizons, and resource availability. Comparative case analysis—from Napoleon's campaigns and the Second Punic War to Operation Desert Storm (1991), the Second Karabakh War (2020), and contemporary subversion—confirms that strategic choices reflect not only military necessity but also leaders' perceptions of authority, risk, and legitimacy. Strategic selection is further shaped by political aim type, opponent profile and centers of gravity, urgency, resource and force-generation capacity, domestic politics and civil-military relations, the external environment, and leadership traits. Overall, the findings confirm that military strategy is a form of political choice, whose effectiveness depends on alignment between political objectives, available capabilities, and the broader decision-making context.

Theoretical implications. This study can be applied to predict and analyze how political leaders translate objectives into military tactics, guiding research and models in strategic studies, civil-military relations, and conflict decision-making.

Practical implications. This study can assist military planners, policymakers, and analysts in anticipating leaders' strategic choices and tailoring operational, diplomatic, or deterrence measures accordingly.

Value. It bridges the gap between political objectives and military action, offering both a conceptual framework for understanding leadership-driven strategy and practical insights for anticipating and influencing real-world conflict decisions.

Paper type. Theoretical.

Мета дослідження. Пояснити, яким чином політичне лідерство формує вибір і адаптацію фундаментальних воєнних тактик шляхом аналізу когнітивних, інституційних і політичних механізмів, через які політичні цілі трансформуються у конкретні форми організованого насильства.

Метод дослідження. Порівняльний аналіз і синтез.

Результати дослідження. Дослідження показує, що вибір фундаментальних воєнних тактик — знищення, виснаження, залякування та підривної діяльності — зумовлюється насамперед політичними цілями, а не лише матеріальними чи доктринальними чинниками. **Політичне лідерство** є ключовою ланкою, через яку політичний намір трансформується у форми застосування військової сили. Встановлено, що когнітивні установки лідерів, інституційні обмеження та характеристики політичного режиму визначають спосіб перетворення політичних цілей в організоване насильство. Запропонована типологія стратегічних логік пов'язує вибір тактики з типом політичної мети, характеристиками противника, часовими горизонтами та ресурсною забезпеченістю. Порівняльний аналіз історичних і сучасних кейсів підтверджує, що стратегічні рішення відображають не лише військову доцільність, а й сприйняття лідерами влади, ризику та легітимності, а також залежать від профілю противника, терміновості, ресурсів, внутрішньої політики, цивільно-військових відносин і зовнішнього середовища. Загалом результати підтверджують, що військова стратегія є формою політичного вибору, ефективність якого визначається узгодженістю між політичними цілями, спроможностями та контекстом ухвалення рішень.

Теоретична цінність дослідження. Дослідження пропонує аналітичну рамку для прогнозування та пояснення того, як політичні лідери трансформують політичні цілі у воєнні тактики, сприяючи розвитку теорії та моделей у стратегічних студіях, цивільно-військових відносинах і дослідженнях ухвалення рішень у конфліктах.

Практична цінність дослідження. Отримані результати можуть бути використані військовими планувальниками, політиками та аналітиками для передбачення стратегічних рішень лідерів і відповідного коригування операційних, дипломатичних або стримувальних заходів.

Цінність дослідження. Робота поєднує політичні цілі з військовими діями, пропонуючи як концептуальну основу для розуміння стратегій, зумовлених лідерством, так і практичні орієнтири для прогнозування та впливу на реальні рішення у збройних конфліктах.

Тип статті. Теоретична.

Key words: Military Strategy, Annihilation, Exhaustion, Intimidation, Subversion.

Ключові слова: Військова стратегія, знищення, виснаження, залякування та підривна діяльність.

Introduction

In times of war, a leader's responsibilities go well beyond giving orders and guiding army movements. At the highest level, leaders are in charge of outlining the purpose of a war and what constitutes success. They must make sure that the military effort is in line with political, economic, and moral factors by clearly articulating national objectives. In addition to being reachable, these objectives must inspire domestic support and preserve unity among allies. By converting political objectives into workable military plans and ensuring that strategy is closely tied to goals, effective leadership provides commanders and soldiers with a feeling of purpose and direction. Material factors alone rarely determine the choice of military strategy in the waging of war. How political objectives are converted into particular forms of combat is greatly influenced by leadership, which is here defined as the institutional, ideological, and cognitive traits of decision-makers. The choice of strategy reveals as much about a leader's beliefs, limitations, and preferences as it does about battlefield dynamics, whether that is achieved through the total destruction of enemy forces, the eradication of populations, the slow depletion of resources, the strategic use of intimidation, or the clandestine use of subversion.

This article examines how states and armed actors' strategic choices in the pursuit of political goals are influenced by leadership. While the structural and tactical dimensions of war have been extensively examined, comparatively little attention has been paid to how leaders' institutional authority, political contexts, and cognitive frameworks shape their decisions to employ fundamentally different forms of violence. Current models frequently make assumptions about the behavior of rational players or concentrate on military doctrines without adequately taking into consideration the importance of different elements like political goals, the strategic vulnerabilities of the opposition, or regime dynamics in waging war.

In order to fill this gap, the article creates a conceptual typology of four fundamental military tactics: subversion, intimidation, exhaustion and annihilation. It then examines how the selection of these tactics is influenced by a variety of factors. The paper uses comparative case studies to show how leaders tend to adopt particular strategic logics under different institutional, political, and environmental circumstances. The results are intended to improve theoretical knowledge as well as useful frameworks for predicting how political leaders may use violence as a weapon to gain power.

Literature review

A foundational premise in strategic studies is that war is inseparable from politics, as political objectives determine the scope, intensity, and termination logic of organized violence. This insight originates in classical theory but has been substantially refined in contemporary scholarship. Dimitriu argues that war should be understood as a fundamentally political phenomenon whose conduct and meaning are shaped by political choice and contestation rather than by purely operational or technical logics (Dimitriu, 2018). From this perspective, military strategy cannot be treated as an autonomous domain; instead, it constitutes a political process through which ends are translated into coercive means.

Within international relations theory, the literature on **war aims** provides strong empirical support for the primacy of political objectives in shaping conflict outcomes. Sullivan demonstrates that even materially superior states often fail when political objectives are misaligned with available strategies or when the anticipated costs exceed domestic and international tolerance levels (Sullivan, 2007). Complementing this argument, Dill conceptualizes modern warfare through the "belligerent's trilemma," highlighting the structural tension among military necessity, political constraints, and normative-legal obligations (Dill, 2015). Together, these works reinforce the analytical priority of political objectives over operational design and justify a leadership-centered approach to strategic choice.

A parallel strand of scholarship conceptualizes **military strategy** as the critical link between policy and battlefield performance. Meiser, Cramer, and Turner-Brady argue that strategy matters

precisely because it structures how military power is coordinated, sustained, and aligned with political objectives, thereby shaping effectiveness beyond tactics or material inputs alone (Meiser et al., 2021). This view challenges reductionist approaches that attribute outcomes solely to battlefield dynamics or resource asymmetries. At the same time, organizational theories caution against excessive leader-centrism. Posen's seminal analysis of military doctrine demonstrates that strategic preferences are often constrained by institutional interests, organizational routines, and external threat environments, limiting the degree to which individual leaders can freely impose their strategic visions (Posen, 1984).

The literature on **civil–military relations** further specifies the institutional mechanisms through which political objectives are translated into military action. Huntington's theory of objective civilian control emphasizes professional military autonomy under firm civilian supremacy as a prerequisite for effective strategy implementation (Huntington, 1957). Feaver's principal–agent model refines this view by showing how monitoring, oversight, and incentive structures shape military compliance with political directives (Feaver, 2003). These frameworks help explain cross-national variation in strategic behavior, including the willingness to pursue high-risk decisive campaigns, sustain prolonged wars of exhaustion, or rely on limited coercive measures under conditions of escalation sensitivity.

Decision-making research provides a micro-level foundation for understanding leadership effects under uncertainty. Allison's classic study of the Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates that strategic decisions emerge from the interaction of rational calculation, organizational processes, and bureaucratic politics rather than from a unitary decision-maker (Allison, 1971). In leadership studies, Judge et al.'s meta-analysis identifies systematic relationships between personality traits—such as risk tolerance, conscientiousness, and emotional stability—and leadership effectiveness, offering a disciplined basis for discussing how individual characteristics may influence strategic preferences (Judge et al., 2002). Importantly, this literature underscores that leadership traits exert influence only insofar as they are mediated by institutional and informational contexts.

A growing body of contemporary research addresses **subversion and coercion below the threshold of conventional war**, reflecting shifts in modern conflict. Maschmeyer's analysis of Russian subversion highlights how covert influence, information operations, and political manipulation can precede, accompany, or substitute for conventional military force, depending on political objectives and escalation constraints (Maschmeyer, 2024). This literature emphasizes legitimacy, deniability, and information environments as central variables shaping leaders' strategic calculations regarding cost, risk, and domestic support.

Synthesis and research gap. The reviewed literature converges on three core propositions: first, political objectives define what constitutes success in war and thus constrain strategic choice (Sullivan, 2007; Dill, 2015); second, military strategy functions as the essential link between political intent and military action (Dimitriu, 2018; Meiser et al., 2021); third, leadership matters, but its effects are mediated by institutions, civil–military relations, and organizational constraints (Posen, 1984; Feaver, 2003; Allison, 1971). What remains underdeveloped is an integrated explanatory framework that systematically maps *types of political objectives and leadership conditions* onto *distinct strategic logics of force employment*—such as annihilation, exhaustion, intimidation, and subversion. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and analytical prediction in strategic studies.

Materials and Methods

Research Materials. The empirical and theoretical foundation of this study consists of a body of scholarly works in military strategy, theory of war, political leadership, civil–military relations, and strategic studies, as well as historical and analytical materials on military campaigns and conflicts across different historical periods. The research materials include classical theoretical sources (notably the works of Carl von Clausewitz and their contemporary interpretations), recent articles

published in peer-reviewed international journals, analytical monographs, and documented accounts of military–political case studies.

The empirical basis relies on secondary data covering historical examples of the application of different strategic logics of warfare, including Napoleon’s campaigns, the Second Punic War, the German campaign of 1940, Operation Desert Storm (1991), the Second Karabakh War (2020), as well as selected cases of exhaustion, intimidation, and subversion strategies in contemporary conflicts. These cases are not treated as independent objects of empirical testing but are used as illustrative and comparative material to support theoretical generalization.

Research Methods. The study is based on a qualitative research design oriented toward theoretical analysis and conceptual modeling.

The primary method is **theoretical and analytical analysis**, applied to examine the political nature of war, the relationship between political objectives and military strategy, and to integrate approaches from strategic studies and political leadership theory. Within this framework, existing concepts of war aims, strategic choice, and civil–military relations are critically assessed.

A **systematic literature review** method is employed to identify key theoretical approaches explaining the selection of military strategies and to reveal the existing research gap concerning the role of political leadership in shaping the strategic logic of force employment.

The **comparative qualitative case analysis** method is used to compare different forms of strategic behavior—annihilation, exhaustion, intimidation, and subversion—across diverse political and institutional contexts. The comparison is conducted along the following analytical dimensions: type of political objectives, opponent profile and centers of gravity, time horizon and urgency, resource base and force-generation capacity, domestic political conditions and civil–military relations, external environment, as well as leadership personality traits and leadership style.

To synthesize the findings, the study applies **conceptual modeling**, resulting in a typology of fundamental strategic logics of war and the development of an analytical decision-making matrix for strategy selection. This matrix links political objectives, environmental constraints, and available capabilities with the likely strategic choices of political leadership.

Methodological Limitations. The study is theoretical in nature and does not involve quantitative hypothesis testing or statistical modeling. The selected cases do not constitute a representative empirical sample in a strict methodological sense and serve primarily an illustrative and heuristic function. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as a conceptual framework that can inform further empirical research and applied strategic analysis.

Reliability and Replicability. The reliability of the results is ensured through the use of established academic sources, internal logical consistency of the theoretical arguments, and transparency of analytical criteria. The proposed approach is replicable within qualitative strategic studies and can be applied to the analysis of other conflicts and politico-military contexts.

Results

The Political Foundations of Military Strategy: Linking War Goals to Strategic Choice

War is fundamentally a political act in which violence or coercive action serves the pursuit of political objectives. It makes the relationship between war, war goals, and military strategy central to understanding both its causes and outcomes. As famously articulated by Clausewitz (1832), war is governed by its political goal rather than being an act of mindless emotion (Clausewitz, 1832/1976; see also Vego, 2025), highlighting the intrinsic connection between war and politics where military action serves as an instrument to achieve political ends. In this sense, the war goal, the political condition a state seeks to impose on its adversary—shapes every aspect of military planning and operational design. Professor Sullivan (2007) further elaborates on this by defining “political objectives directly affect war outcomes”, emphasizing the concrete outcomes parties seek to realize through warfare. Similarly, Janina (2015) conceptualizes war aims as the desired end-state in the

international system that a belligerent seeks to attain, underscoring the strategic vision guiding wartime conduct. Together, these definitions frame war goals as purposeful political objectives that shape the initiation, conduct, and resolution of conflict.

War goals can be systematically categorized along several analytical dimensions that help clarify the strategic intentions behind armed conflicts. One fundamental distinction is between status quo and revisionist goals. According to professor Tekin (2024), status quo objectives aim to maintain the existing balance of power and territorial arrangements, whereas revisionist goals seek to alter borders, regimes, or spheres of influence. The important distinction between limited and unlimited war goals was given in another study. Professor Schweller (2015) explains that limited goals tend to focus on specific, achievable objectives, such as reclaiming lost territory, while unlimited goals encompass more expansive ambitions, including wholesale changes in norms, regimes, and territory. Unlimited goals may be characterized as transformational and existential aims: the former seeks to reshape the political or strategic environment without eradicating the opponent, while the latter pursues survival or total victory through the elimination of the adversary. Political purpose is closely linked to the extent and ferocity of military operations because a leader's political vision and sense of threat decide whether a fight is fought with limited, utilitarian purposes or with wide, existential intent.

Finney (2020) divides goals into immediate and ultimate, where ultimate goals refer to more extensive, long-term political changes, such as profound, fundamental shifts in the political structure, governance, or societal organization of a state or region that take place over an extended period of time, often well beyond the immediate military conflict. Immediate goals are specific military objectives that are pursued directly on the battlefield in a short amount of time, such as occupying a strategic location.

Generally, success of military strategy depends on accomplishing strategic goals which form the cornerstone of political objectives. As the art of using force to achieve political goals, military strategy serves as a link between links tactics, operations and national policy (Meiser et al., 2021). War can be a logical tool of statecraft when political objectives and strategy are clear; when they are not, wars sometimes become drawn out, illogical, or counterproductive (Dimitriu, 2018). Historical examples, ranging from the Napoleonic Wars to current interventions, show that achieving political goals by military means is a more accurate indicator of war success than winning on the battlefield. As political objectives formulated by civilian government, preserving a balance between political goals and military achievement depends on the principles of civilian control of the military and positive civil-military relations. Civilian leaders guide, influence, and authorize national security policy, military commanders translate them into feasible strategies and maintain professional standards (Lee & Margulies, 2023). Therefore, comprehending war necessitates not only the study of battle and leadership but also the ongoing balancing act between military strategy and political goals, which establishes whether the use of force serves the intended political objective. This negotiation is directly reflected in the choice of an appropriate military strategy, which constitutes a complex process of decision-making that integrates political objectives, assessments of the strategic environment, and the commander's judgment under uncertainty. In other words, military strategy is the process that converts the political justification for war into military action.

Even though the realms of combat have shifted from land, sea, and air to space and cyberspace, the basic principles of choosing a workable strategy still center on weakening the enemy's will or force. A wide range of tactics are included in military strategy with the goal of defeating the enemy by preventing them from mounting a strong defense. Theorists and leaders have worked to group various methods into conceptual frameworks that make clear the fundamental goals and workings of war. These frameworks make it easier to discern between tactics that aim to physically destroy the enemy and those that try to weaken their political unity or

psychological fortitude. Military thinkers can better examine and implement particular approaches, or “mini-ideas”, that are suited to specific situations and objectives by decomposing huge campaigns into smaller, more concentrated theories. These mini-theories highlight different strategic goals, tactics, and psychological aspects of fighting and provide insight into the variety of ways that conflict can be fought outside of the battlefield, including direct and indirect techniques of forcing an opponent to surrender. According to the overview given by strategic-studies scholars, exhaustion, annihilation, intimidation, and subversion are the leading mini-theories or the four fundamental military strategies.

Annihilation focuses on delivering rapid, decisive blows to incapacitate enemy forces, often through concentrated and overwhelming attacks (Albino et al., 2016). It emphasizes the decisive defeat of the enemy’s main forces in a single or series of battles, rendering them incapable of further resistance. The objective is not merely to inflict casualties but to break the enemy’s operational cohesion and morale, thereby accelerating the end of hostilities. Historically, such strategies have been employed by leaders seeking to avoid prolonged conflict by forcing a swift and conclusive outcome. However, the reliance on rapid victory also carries significant risks, as failure to achieve decisive results can lead to prolonged attrition or strategic overextension.

Exhaustion focuses on destroying the adversary’s resources and will over time by inflicting casualties and losses of material, making prolonged conflict unsustainable (Ydstebø, 2023). This strategy aims to wear down the enemy gradually instead of fighting major confrontations. This approach often involves cutting supply lines, conducting harassment operations, and leveraging economic or diplomatic means to undermine the enemy’s capacity to sustain warfare. Unlike annihilation, which seeks immediate and absolute destruction, exhaustion requires patience, resilience, and the ability to sustain operations over an extended period. While potentially less costly in terms of immediate casualties, exhaustion can impose significant strains on both the attacker and defender, as protracted engagements test logistical endurance and domestic support. Consequently, exhaustion strategies demand careful calibration to avoid diminishing one’s own fighting capability or political will.

Intimidation involves psychological warfare and demonstrations of power designed to erode the enemy’s will without necessarily engaging in full-scale conflict (NATO, 2025). The approach utilizes psychological warfare tactics to break the enemy’s will before or during the conflict, aiming to avoid prolonged fighting by creating fear or uncertainty. This strategy often employs displays of overwhelming force, propaganda, and strategic misinformation to undermine the adversary’s confidence and cohesion. In order to force surrender or concessions without having to pay the price of direct conflict, intimidation aims to create uncertainty and fear among both civilian populations and enemy ranks. Furthermore, the perceived resolve of the intimidating force and the veracity of threats determine how effective intimidation is, therefore perception management and communication are essential elements. By discouraging violence or encouraging voluntary withdrawal, intimidation can, when used effectively, result in a speedy resolution of conflicts; however, its effectiveness may be lessened if the enemy views such tactics as mere showmanship or if the enemy’s morale is strong.

Subversion targets the enemy from within through espionage, propaganda, sabotage, infiltration, or cyber disruption or support to dissident group, to destabilize the sociopolitical center of gravity with the goal of undermining a governing authority’s political, military, economic, psychological, or morale (Briggs, 2023). Each of these activities may be employed alone or in combination, depending on the nature of the conflict, the capabilities of the belligerents, and the strategic goals at stake. By exploiting internal divisions, subversion seeks to weaken the adversary’s political stability and erode public confidence in leadership, thereby reducing their capacity to effectively prosecute war. This method often operates below the threshold of conventional warfare, blurring the lines between military and civilian domains and complicating the adversary’s ability to

respond decisively. Furthermore, subversion can have a prolonged and cumulative effect, gradually destabilizing institutions and creating conditions favorable to the subverting power's objectives. However, it also carries inherent risks, including the potential to provoke harsh reprisals or unintended escalation, and requires sophisticated intelligence capabilities and an acute understanding of the target society's vulnerabilities.

This study uses a qualitative method, which includes literature review approach, theoretical analysis of political leadership within the framework of existing theories of leadership, political decision-making processes and comparative case-study to gain a deeper understanding of a subject.

Political leadership covers a range of approaches that examine how leaders impact the political process, including ideas like the leader's capacity to rally support, express public values, recognize issues, create solutions and make decision. Associate professor at Yemyung Graduate University Ofosu-Anim (2022) acknowledged that factors such as personal characteristics, leadership style, political motivation and stress tolerance are central concepts to the behavior of the leader and define leadership outcomes within a political setting.

The personal characteristics of a political leader are fundamental to the "Trait" theory of leadership, which suggests that successful leaders have specific characteristics that make them likely to thrive in roles of power. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, a consensus emerged among scholars that personality traits play a role in effective leadership, but that these traits must be appropriate for the profession. Later professor Robert Katz classified the personal qualities necessary for effective leadership into three groups: technical, human, and conceptual qualities (Peterson & Van Fleet, 2004). Technical skills involve analytical thinking along with professional competence. Human skills are related to the ability to work with people and effectively influence them.

Judge et al. (2002) conducted an in-depth analysis of 78 leadership and personality studies published between 1967 and 2000 and determined follow relationship between five personality traits known as the Big Five and leadership's effectiveness: Extraversion's traits such as assertiveness, oratory, energetic, sociability positively related to leadership. Conscientiousness, also closely related to leadership and shows how responsibly and seriously a person approaches their work. Openness, which indicates innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship and a willingness to learn is linked to effective leadership. Traits such as self – confidence, composure, emotional intelligence, risk tolerance indicate to low neuroticism which are essential for successful leadership. Agreeableness encompassing traits, such as compromise, trust, and altruism appears least associated with leadership. Drawing on research analyzing the primary personal qualities of prominent leaders, including Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, George Washington, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela, and Heydar Aliyev, we can identify a set of key personality traits commonly associated with strong political leadership: integrity, vision, and communication with modern necessities such as emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills.

A leadership style includes behavior and ability of leader to effectively direct, motivate and consolidate people toward common goal, which can be understood through established leadership theories such as "Behavioural", "Contingency", "Situational", "Transactional" and "Transformational". Analysis of these theories shows various styles, but in terms of political leadership we will focus on autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transformational and transactional leadership. The pioneers of the "Behavioural" theory Kurt Levin, Ralph Uolt, and Ronald Lippitt identified three leadership styles, that are autocratic style, democratic style, and laissez-faire style (Zeerak, 2023). In an autocratic style, the leader is focused on results. He does not delegate authority to anyone, gives specific instructions on what, when, and how to do things, and makes decisions alone. The liberal style implies that the manager gives subordinates maximum freedom in performing tasks, making decisions, and solving problems.

The “Contingency” and “Situational” leadership theories assert that when leaders make decisions, they need to consider all elements of the current situation and act accordingly (Khan et al., 2016). A political leader uses an autocratic style in situations that demand swift, decisive actions, like military actions or emergencies, where a robust, centralized power is essential for effectiveness and adherence. The democratic style employed when circumstances necessitate time for dialogue, exchanging ideas, and reaching agreement, rendering it appropriate for long-term objectives instead of urgent emergencies. A political leader adopts a laissez-faire approach in scenarios where the best time frame is long-term endeavors that permit flexibility and adaptability. This approach is not appropriate for circumstances that demand rapid, centralized, or high-pressure choices.

Transformational and transactional leadership, identified in the 1970s, characterize two of the most prominent styles of leadership that influence how leaders engage with their followers and accomplish organizational objectives (Flynn, 2024). According to Rockwell (2021), “Transactional” leadership is based on a mutual exchange of interests between the leader and the followers, where rewards and punishments are used to motivate subordinates toward performance expectations. Researchers show that, a transactional political leader effective when situations entailing high degree of precision, urgency and time-constraints (Khan et al., 2016). These situations demanded swift, resolute measures to preserve stability and guarantee that all activities were executed in accordance with stringent regulations and accountability. According to McGregor Burns, who established the concept transformational leadership, the “transformational” style of leadership is linked to altering the behaviors and mindsets of followers (Cherry, 2025). This is based on the leader's ability to inspire by influencing their feelings. A political leader resort to transformational when country experience significant or intricate and long-term changes (Barasa & Olanrewaju, 2024). These changes may be related to domestic or foreign policy, and success depend on maintaining motivation and enthusiasm over a long period to guide followers towards the new vision.

Choosing an appropriate military strategy is a challenging political decision-making process that integrates political objectives, assessments of the strategic context, and the leader's judgment amid uncertainty. Researches show, that this process consists of a multi-step process that establishing goals and objectives, collecting data, creating and assessing options, selecting the best alternative, putting it into action, and ultimately reviewing the outcomes (Astbury, 2024; Corporate Education Group, 2025). Key factors include considering both one's own and the adversary's capabilities, resource constraints, domestic, foreign, and global issues, acceptable risk levels and personality of leaders along with aligning military resources with political objectives, what Clausewitz referred to as the “remarkable trinity” of government, army, and people.

Historical Case Studies and Strategic Logic: Evaluating Annihilation, Exhaustion, Intimidation, and Subversion

Case studies give academics and practitioners a way to assess theoretical ideas against historical facts, identify recurrent patterns of strategic success and failure, and examine the contextual elements that determine the suitability of different strategic approaches, such as annihilation, exhaustion, intimidation, or subversion.

Examples of annihilation strategies include the Second Punic War, Napoleon Bonaparte's campaigns, the German campaign in France in May 1940, Operation Desert Storm (1991), and the Second Karabakh War (2020). The Roman field armies served as the main center of gravity for the Roman Republic during the Second Punic War because their defeat—particularly at Cannae— weakened Rome's military might, political stability, and morale, exposing Hannibal's strategic emphasis on eliminating the enemy's primary source of power rather than just capturing territory (Davies, 2024). However, strategically, Carthage did not follow up with resources adequate to force Rome's surrender; Rome's remaining alliances, reserves, manpower and logistic capacity enabled it to recover and continue the war successfully shifting to exhaustion strategy.

Napoleon achieved spectacular victories (Austerlitz 1805, Jena–Auerstedt 1806) where enemy armies were rapidly destroyed or rendered ineffective. Napoleon emphasized speed, mass, concentrated maneuver, and the decisive engagement of enemy armies aiming to achieve total military and political domination rather than prolonged attritional conflict (DiMichele, 2023). But by 1813-14, facing coalitions, extended supply lines, strategic over-stretch and a resilient enemy adopting attritional tactics the strategy of annihilation faltered. The Allies avoided direct confrontation with Napoleon, instead targeting his marshals, severing lines of communication and reducing his operational freedom – a shift toward exhaustion, which implemented Roman before in the Second Punic War.

The German campaign in France (May 1940) exemplifies the strategy of annihilation: rapid concentration of force and maneuver to destroy the enemy's center of gravity before mobilization (Shuster, 2023). This case shows annihilation's effectiveness when surprise, operational tempo and technological superiority coincide. However, it also warns of overextension — Germany's later failure in the USSR (1941–43) illustrates the limits of annihilation when geography and logistics impose friction.

The US-led coalition campaign to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in 1991 (Operation Desert Storm) is a modern example of a rapid campaign aimed at incapacitating enemy forces decisively. The campaign quickly succeeded in simulating the logic of annihilation by achieving deep envelopment, coalition air superiority, suppression of Iraqi command and control, and isolation of Iraqi divisions (Westermeyer, 2014). The coalition's overwhelming operational, logistical, and technological dominance over Iraq, which depends on conventionally fielded forces, is what will determine its success.

Second Karabakh War (2020) demonstrates that modern annihilation-style operational effects are attainable when high tempo, integrated ISR, precision strike, and concentrated maneuver are brought to bear against an opponent with inferior reconnaissance and counter-capabilities. Although the war lasted only 44 days, a relatively short duration by modern standards, Azerbaijani forces pursued and achieved rapid operational success, decisively shifting the balance on the battlefield. The campaign also shows that annihilation at the operational level can be bounded by clear political objectives and third-party mediation (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021a, 2021b; Guner et al., 2022; Iskandarov et al., 2022; Hasanov et al., 2024).

The Roman general Fabius Maximus is often credited with pioneering a classical form of the strategy of exhaustion, particularly during the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) against Hannibal Barca of Carthage. In response to Hannibal's unexpected and devastating victories—most notably at Cannae (216 BCE)—Fabius developed a defensive and attritional approach that came to be known as the Fabian strategy (Hickman, 2017). Rather than confronting Hannibal directly in large-scale battles, where Roman forces had suffered catastrophic losses, Fabius sought to undermine the Carthaginian campaign by avoiding decisive engagements, harassing supply lines, and exhausting enemy resources over time.

During the Turko – Safavid War (1603–1618), Shah Abbas I the Great employed a deliberate “scorched earth” strategy as part of a broader exhaustion approach against the Ottoman Empire (Uyar & Erickson, 2009, p.71). Recognizing the numerical and logistical advantages of the Ottoman forces, Abbas avoided direct large-scale confrontations and instead focused on denying the invaders sustenance and supply. As the Ottoman armies advanced, Safavid troops systematically destroyed crops, evacuated populations, and burned towns and villages along the invasion routes, leaving no provisions for the enemy. This forced the Ottomans to extend their already overstrained supply lines across harsh terrain, suffering from shortages, disease, and attrition rather than battlefield defeats.

Operation Allied Force aimed to coerce Serbia to withdraw from Kosovo through sustained air power, minimizing NATO casualties. The campaign's success illustrates the strategy of intimidation through controlled escalation. The case illustrates that intimidation can be effective

when the intimidator possesses significant credibility, and the opponent's political costs of opposing outweigh the expected advantages

A traditional subversion tactic, political manipulation, propaganda, and infiltration were all used by the USSR to consolidate its hold on Czechoslovakia. In May 1968 Soviet KGB launch special covert campaign named "Operation Progress". In order to crush the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia from the late 1960s to the early 1970s the KGB deployed several covert agents to penetrate various organizations involved in the democratization process (Uyar, M. & Erickson, E.J., 2009). This case illustrates how subversion flourishes in society with political divisions and information control.

The success of Russia's subversion approach as a way to accomplish geopolitical goals short of full-scale conventional combat is demonstrated by the 2014 invasion of Crimea. By taking advantage of institutional weaknesses and social divisions, this tactic allowed for quick territorial control while preserving plausible deniability in the global arena (Maschmeyer, 2024). Thus, the Crimean instance demonstrates how modern subversion combines political, military, and informational tools to undermine target governments and alter the balance of power in the region.

In common factors which influenced on leader's decision to take specific approach can be combined under seven titles: political aim typology, opponent profile and centers of gravity, time horizon and urgency, resources and force generation capacity, domestic politics and civil–military relations, external environment, personality and leadership style.

Political aim typology: Political objectives may be categorized along a spectrum: existential (e.g., regime survival, state integrity), transformational (e.g., regime change, territorial revision), and limited (e.g., policy concessions or bargaining position improvements). The sharper and more essential the goal, the higher the leader's willingness to accept risk, expenses, and intensification

Opponent profile and centers of gravity: An opponent profile consists of examining and comprehending their weaknesses and essential needs to pinpoint this center of gravity, facilitating the creation of strategies to diminish it. Understanding the opponent's strategic vulnerabilities or centers of gravity (CoG) key questions raised questions raised by military strategists and planner (Eystein, 2022). The opponent's strategic vulnerabilities or centers of gravity (COG) entails pinpointing the fundamental sources of their power, which may consist of military capabilities, alliances, public backing, or even national morale

Time horizon and urgency: The time horizon and urgency of strategic choice are two related but different characteristics of planning: the time horizon defines the period (short-, medium-, or long-term) (Sołoducho-Pelc, 2015) for which the strategic goals are calculated. Urgency reflects how quickly a decision must be made and the results must be seen. Short horizons and high urgency often lead to choose a more decisive, but also riskier strategy.

Resources and force generation capacity: A leader's decision to follow a specific strategy is often shaped by country's technological capacity, resource base, and ability to conduct large-scale, decisive operations, ensuring that human, technological, and manufacturing resources are precisely aligned with anticipated action.

Domestic politics and civil–military relations: A leader's choice of military strategy is heavily influenced by domestic politics and civil-military relations. Civil-military relations effect strategic evaluation, strategy and decision-making, and professional ethics and effectiveness (Lee, 2025). Political leaders' priorities, regime type, and the need for political survival influence whether they favor aggressive or restrained approaches. Simultaneously, the degree of military autonomy and the quality of civilian control affect how military advice is integrated into strategic decisions. A state with high casualty sensitivity may prefer standoff operations, cyberwarfare, or proxy engagement. Where civil–military trust is robust, leaders can manage complex joint campaigns that integrate political warfare with conventional operations.

External environment: No strategy is developed in isolation. The international system, which includes allies, the sponsors of rivals, and international institutions, must be taken into

consideration by leaders. Strategic decisions are shaped by risks of escalation (e.g., nuclear thresholds, economic sanctions), as well as by third-party perceptions.

Personality and leadership style: The choice of strategy is directly affected by the leader's personality and style of leadership (authoritarian, democratic, liberal, etc.), as these factors dictate how decisions will be made, how the team will arrange its work, and what objectives will be established.

Based on research a comprehensive matrix has been developed to assist in determining the most appropriate military strategy in varying geopolitical and operational contexts. This matrix provides a structured framework that enables policymakers and military planners to evaluate key contextual variables such as political objectives, enemy vulnerabilities, time constraints, domestic tolerance for risk, and escalation dynamics. Thus, all of the contextual variables systematically match these factors to the most suitable strategic approach.

Based on the abovementioned factors, the following narratives delineate a typology of strategic approaches to the use of force and coercion, specifying the associated political objectives, enabling conditions, and contextual variables that shape strategic choice and effectiveness.

Annihilation. An annihilation strategy is most likely to be adopted when political objectives are transformational or existential in nature. In such cases, the political leadership seeks either a fundamental change in the adversary's regime, ideology, or political order, or aims to ensure national survival by expelling an invader and defending sovereignty, territorial integrity, or collective identity. These objectives are typically clear, decisive, and non-negotiable, leaving little room for incremental or compromise-based approaches.

The opponent profile and identification of centers of gravity further condition the feasibility of annihilation. This strategy is particularly effective when the adversary relies heavily on concentrated military power, such as fielded forces, integrated air defense systems, armored formations, or other critical military systems. Even when the opponent benefits from strong social cohesion or external patronage, annihilation remains viable if the primary center of gravity lies in its conventional military capabilities rather than in dispersed insurgent networks or societal resilience.

Time horizon and urgency are central determinants. Annihilation strategies are typically pursued under short time horizons and during a limited window of opportunity. High urgency prevails when delays could allow the adversary to adapt, mobilize reinforcements, secure external support, or alter the operational environment in ways that would foreclose decisive action. In such contexts, speed and simultaneity become essential to strategic success.

The availability of resources and force-generation capacity is another critical prerequisite. Annihilation requires a pronounced degree of operational asymmetry, where the initiating actor enjoys clear advantages in technology, force quality, or command-and-control. Advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), precision-strike capabilities, cyber and electronic warfare, and well-trained standing forces enable network-centric operations designed to achieve rapid and decisive defeat. The goal is not gradual erosion but the swift collapse of the adversary's military effectiveness.

Domestic political conditions and civil–military relations must also be favorable. Successful annihilation strategies are usually underpinned by politically unified leadership, high levels of public support, and stable, professional civil–military relations. Institutional autonomy and military professionalism facilitate the concentration and employment of overwhelming force, while minimizing internal friction or political interference during critical phases of execution.

The external environment significantly shapes strategic choice. Annihilation is more likely when the risk of external intervention is limited and potential adversaries are weak, divided, or strategically constrained. At the same time, support from allies through intelligence sharing, military assistance, or access to advanced weapon systems can further enable the effective pursuit of annihilation by amplifying operational reach and tempo.

Finally, personality traits and leadership styles play a consequential role in shaping both strategic decision-making and operational behaviour. Annihilation strategies tend to be favored by leaders characterized by high decisiveness, aggressive risk tolerance, and a strong belief in decisive battle. Such leaders often display low tolerance for protracted conflict and ambiguity, preferring centralized planning and rapid execution. Autocratic or transactional leadership styles, especially when coupled with ideological conviction or personal authority, are frequently associated with this strategic preference.

In terms of outcomes, success in annihilation necessitates a timely transition from military victory to stabilization and governance support, with clearly defined civil–military boundaries to consolidate gains and prevent strategic overreach. Conversely, failure demands strategic reassessment. This may involve redefining achievable objectives and shifting toward alternative approaches such as attrition, limited aims, negotiated settlement, or even strategic withdrawal. In such scenarios, priority must be given to force preservation and sustainment to avoid catastrophic losses or irreversible strategic defeat.

Exhaustion. An exhaustion strategy is typically adopted when political objectives are either limited or existential, yet a decisive battle would be prohibitively costly, strategically uncertain, or politically unsustainable. In its limited form, exhaustion seeks incremental gains, such as territorial control, prestige, or deterrence without aspiring to the complete destruction of the adversary. In its existential variant, the objective is survival as a sovereign state, regime, or people, where endurance rather than rapid victory becomes the decisive metric of success.

The opponent profile and identification of centers of gravity are central to the logic of exhaustion. This strategy is particularly effective against adversaries characterized by elite factionalism, visible internal infighting, and limited societal or institutional resilience. Rather than relying on a single decisive engagement, exhaustion targets non-redundant, time-sensitive centers of gravity, such as fragile political cohesion, vulnerable economic systems, or overstretched military readiness. Sustained pressure exploits existing cracks within the adversary's system, gradually amplifying internal dissent, inducing defections, and eroding both capacity and will to resist.

Time horizon and urgency distinguish exhaustion from annihilation in fundamental ways. Exhaustion operates across medium to long time horizons, depending on the adversary's access to external support. When the opponent possesses limited backing and relies on single-point centers of gravity, urgency is moderate and the campaign can yield results within a finite period. Conversely, when the adversary benefits from robust external patrons, urgency is lower and success depends on a credible commitment to a prolonged campaign. The core assumption is that time will degrade the adversary's will and capacity faster than one's own, making endurance itself a strategic weapon.

The feasibility of exhaustion is closely tied to resources and force-generation capacity. Unlike annihilation, exhaustion does not require technological superiority in precision strike, ISR, cyber, or electronic warfare. Instead, it favors actors with sustainable access to resources, abundant manpower, and the ability to replenish forces more rapidly than the adversary. Even in the presence of shortages in precision-guided munitions or advanced targeting capabilities, exhaustion remains viable so long as the initiating actor can sustain pressure and absorb the costs of prolonged conflict.

Domestic political considerations and civil–military relations are particularly salient in exhaustion strategies. The domestic costs, such as casualties, economic strain, and political exhaustion must remain politically tolerable over time. Even in contexts of high casualty aversion, an exhaustion strategy remains viable so long as mobilization capacity is maintained and civil–military relations remain functional. Public support, resilient political institutions, and economic endurance are indispensable, as exhaustion relies on long-term coordination, force preservation, and societal resilience rather than dramatic battlefield victories.

The external environment further conditions strategic choice. Exhaustion becomes most viable when third parties exhibit a high sensitivity to escalation, which limits the adversary's

freedom of action without prompting direct third-party intervention. In such settings, major external actors may prefer diplomatic pressure, economic instruments, or limited proxy support rather than overt military involvement. Even where the adversary has allies or patrons, exhaustion can succeed if those external actors lack either the will or the capability to intervene decisively within a relevant timeframe.

Finally, personality and leadership style exert a significant influence on the adoption and success of exhaustion strategies. Leaders who favor exhaustion tend to display emotional stability, caution, patience, and coalition-building skills. Democratic or transformational leadership styles are particularly well suited, as they emphasize legitimacy, morale, and collective purpose. Transformational leaders sustain endurance by framing prolonged struggle as meaningful and winnable, thereby maintaining cohesion despite the absence of rapid success.

In terms of outcomes, success in exhaustion requires the consolidation of incremental gains, the strengthening of international support, and the resolution of remaining disputes through diplomacy or institutional mechanisms. Legitimacy is reinforced through sustained cooperation with regional and global partners. Conversely, failure necessitates strategic reassessment. Options may include shifting toward more targeted military actions, political negotiation, subversion, or if conditions permit escalation toward annihilation. In all cases, the decisive question remains whether continued endurance serves strategic objectives or merely prolongs attrition without meaningful advantage.

Intimidation. An intimidation strategy is employed to achieve limited and clearly specified political objectives through calibrated deterrence and compellence rather than outright destruction of the adversary. The political aim is typically specific, measurable, and bounded, such as altering particular behaviors, compelling compliance with defined demands, or deterring imminent actions. Intimidation seeks to balance coercive pressure with escalation control, relying on the credibility of threatened costs rather than their full execution.

The opponent profile and identification of centers of gravity are critical to the effectiveness of intimidation. This strategy is most effective against adversaries with highly centralized leadership structures, where decision-making authority is concentrated in a narrow political elite. In such cases, the principal centers of gravity are political will and legitimacy, rather than military forces per se. Targets that exhibit high sensitivity to domestic audience costs, weak popular legitimacy, or heavy reliance on urban elites, supply hubs, or patronage networks are particularly vulnerable, as limited disruptions can generate disproportionate political effects.

Time horizon and urgency in intimidation strategies vary according to the strategic context. In situations of high urgency, such as imminent threats or rapidly escalating crises, intimidation operates over short to medium time horizons and demands prompt, visible action. Conversely, in lower-urgency contexts, intimidation can serve as a form of strategic deterrence, unfolding gradually and allowing for calibrated pressure and strategic patience. In both cases, credibility is paramount: a mismatch between posture and capability risks creating a coercive credibility gap, while miscalculation can result in inadvertent escalation.

The success of intimidation depends heavily on resources and force-generation capacity, particularly those that are observable and interpretable by the adversary. Industrial and economic resilience, visible combat power, and a credible mobilization base underpin the threat of enforcement. Intimidation fails when the adversary doubts either the reality of the threat or the willingness of the coercing actor to carry it out. Thus, signaling, readiness, and sustainment are as important as actual combat effectiveness.

Domestic political conditions and civil–military relations play a decisive role. Public tolerance or support for coercive measures, political cohesion, elite alignment, and controllable public opinion create the domestic foundation for credible intimidation. Strong civilian control over a professional and compliant military ensures that coercive actions remain disciplined and reversible. In this sense,

successful intimidation depends less on raw military power than on credible political will, effective civil–military governance, and careful escalation management.

The external environment further constrains or enables intimidation strategies. Allied backing or credible external guarantees enhance coercive leverage, while a limited willingness among third parties to intervene militarily reduces the risk of punitive counter-escalation. Intimidation is viable only within an environment that allows clear signaling, preserves channels for de-escalation, and increases the target’s sensitivity to disruption without triggering broader conflict.

Personality and leadership style are particularly salient in intimidation. Leaders who favor this strategy tend to exhibit high strategic empathy, self-confidence, disciplined risk tolerance, and strong communicative competence. Transactional or calibrated autocratic leadership styles are often associated with intimidation, as they facilitate clear chains of command, rapid implementation of measured actions, and reliable enforcement of restraints.

In terms of outcomes, success requires consolidating gains while minimizing harm, followed by a transition toward legitimate control, cooperation, or negotiated arrangements. Effective intimidation culminates not in sustained coercion but in behavioural compliance and de-escalation. Failure, by contrast, necessitates prompt stabilization and reassessment. This includes diagnosing why coercion failed, pursuing lawful cost-imposition measures in coordination with allies, recalibrating objectives, and instituting clear benchmarks and safeguards to prevent uncontrolled escalation.

Subversion. A subversion strategy is employed to achieve limited political objectives for which it is particularly well suited or, under certain conditions, transformational aims. In its limited form, subversion seeks policy reversal, behavioral change, or the removal of an unfriendly leader without overt military confrontation. In its transformational variant, the objective expands to the toppling of a regime, realignment of a state’s foreign policy orientation, or the dismantling of hostile political, security, or societal institutions. In both cases, success depends on the articulation of a clear and plausible political end state, without which subversion risks becoming destabilizing rather than strategic.

The opponent profile and identification of centers of gravity are foundational to subversion’s logic. This strategy is most effective against states exhibiting weak political legitimacy, elite fragmentation, institutional fragility, and exploitable social cleavages. Rather than targeting military forces, subversion focuses on political, institutional, or social nodes, such as ruling coalitions, bureaucratic chokepoints, information ecosystems, or identity-based divisions. However, the exploitation of such vulnerabilities must be carefully balanced against legal, ethical, and stability considerations. Subversion that disregards these constraints is likely to generate severe humanitarian harm, political backlash, and long-term strategic costs that outweigh short-term gains.

Time horizon and urgency vary according to the scope of political objectives. For limited aims, subversion typically unfolds over medium time horizons with moderate urgency, allowing influence operations to mature gradually. For transformational objectives, timelines extend further and urgency diminishes, as durable political change requires sustained pressure and social adaptation. Importantly, accelerated timelines increase the risk of exposure, which undermines deniability, erodes legitimacy, and elevates legal and political costs, often fatally compromising the strategy.

The feasibility of subversion depends on resources and force-generation capacity that differ markedly from conventional military strategies. Critical enablers include information and technological advantages, economic and financial levers, permissive legal and diplomatic cover, highly trained personnel, and reliable mechanisms for proxy recruitment and management. Where these resources are inadequate or unsustainable, subversion is prone to failure, operational blowback, or strategic outcomes that impose costs exceeding any potential benefits.

Domestic political conditions and civil–military relations are particularly sensitive in subversion campaigns. Effective execution requires clear legal and constitutional authority, firm civilian supremacy, and a stable chain of command supported by institutional safeguards and broad

domestic consensus. Long-duration, deniable influence operations conducted without such foundations risk triggering domestic political crises, institutional capture, erosion of democratic norms, and eventual operational collapse. In this sense, domestic governance constraints are not peripheral but central to subversion's strategic viability.

The external environment further conditions success. Subversion is most viable under favorable geopolitical conditions, including cooperative or pliant third parties that can provide logistical, diplomatic, or informational support. Conversely, when the target state enjoys strong external patrons, military parity, or regional predominance, subversion carries a high risk of escalation, exposure, and strategic failure. In such contexts, indirect interference may provoke countermeasures that neutralize influence and harden the target's internal cohesion.

Personality and leadership style play a critical role in shaping subversion strategies. Effective leaders tend to demonstrate ethical courage, integrity, emotional intelligence, and a risk tolerance calibrated to legal and normative constraints. Leadership styles often blend laissez-faire or transformational approaches necessary for innovation and coalition-building with transactional mechanisms that ensure discipline and control. Clear political purpose, moral framing, long-term commitment, and the ability to inspire both domestic and allied cooperation are essential.

In terms of outcomes, success in subversion requires the careful consolidation of gains through legitimacy, stability, and international diplomatic recognition. Influence achieved without legitimacy remains fragile and reversible. Failure, by contrast, obliges leaders to prioritize damage control, de-escalation, and strategic recalibration in order to prevent broader conflict and preserve residual influence for future engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the core proposition of strategic studies that war is inherently political, while also clarifying the mechanisms through which political objectives are translated into specific forms of organized violence. Unlike approaches that prioritize material capabilities, doctrine, or technology, the analysis demonstrates that political leadership acts as the primary intermediary between political goals and military practice, shaping strategic choice through institutional authority, cognitive perceptions, and decision-making style.

A central contribution of the article is the conceptualization of four fundamental strategic logics—annihilation, exhaustion, intimidation, and subversion—not merely as military options but as politically conditioned modes of force employment. The comparative analysis indicates that the selection among these logics is not determined solely by battlefield considerations. Rather, it reflects how political leaders interpret the nature of their objectives (existential, transformational, or limited), assess acceptable risks, evaluate time horizons, and perceive their own legitimacy.

Annihilation emerges as most likely when political objectives are existential or transformational and compromise is viewed as unacceptable. However, the discussion highlights that its effectiveness is highly context-dependent and contingent on the ability to convert rapid military success into a sustainable political outcome. When such conversion fails, states often shift toward strategies of exhaustion or negotiated settlement. Exhaustion, in turn, appears as a rational political choice when decisive engagement is too costly or uncertain, relying heavily on domestic resilience, legitimacy, and stable civil–military relations rather than immediate military superiority.

Intimidation occupies an intermediate position between force application and force demonstration. The results suggest that intimidation is best understood as a form of political signaling rather than a low-cost substitute for war. Its success depends on the credibility of political will, coherence between rhetoric and capability, and effective escalation control. Failures of intimidation are frequently linked to misperceptions of resolve or legitimacy deficits rather than to insufficient material power.

Subversion represents a distinct strategic logic operating below the threshold of open

warfare. The analysis shows that its effectiveness depends not only on vulnerabilities within the target state but also on the initiating leadership's ability to manage escalation, maintain deniability, and preserve domestic and international legitimacy. This underscores the growing importance of legal, informational, and normative constraints in contemporary strategic competition.

The proposed analytical matrix integrates these insights into a coherent decision-making framework with both explanatory and potential predictive value. At the same time, the study acknowledges limitations related to retrospective case interpretation and the need to further balance leadership-centric explanations with structural factors of the international system.

Overall, the discussion supports the central conclusion that military strategy is not merely a technical instrument of war but a political choice shaped by objectives, constraints, and leadership perceptions. The effectiveness of any strategic logic ultimately depends on its alignment with political aims and the broader context in which force is employed.

Conclusion

Military strategy as a part of grand strategy is more than a permanent plan that describes how military resources or other coercive action will be used through particular employment principles to achieve political objectives. This perception is misleading, because strategic planning is inherently dynamic and must continually adjust to changing operational conditions, altering political goals, and varying resource availability.

The determination of appropriate military strategy is a critical function of political leadership, where constantly changing objectives, military capabilities, and external conditions converge. The process requires not only a deep understanding of the strategic landscape but also the ability to anticipate enemy actions and adapt to evolving circumstances. Competent leaders assess the alignment between available resources and desired outcomes, ensuring that chosen strategies are both feasible and sustainable over time. Leaders must first specify the goal of a conflict, be it containment, deterrence, regime change, territorial gain, or another goal. In turn, these objectives affect the scope, length, and rigor of military operations. The decision to adopt a particular strategy reflects the leader's assessment of the conflict environment, the value of the political objective, the capabilities of both sides, and the acceptable costs. Strategic choice is thus neither arbitrary nor solely determined by military conditions; it is a deeply political decision informed by multiple interacting variables.

According to research, annihilation is most effective as a military tactic when it is underpinned by a clear and unambiguous political objective, such as expelling an enemy from limited territorial gains, particularly when confronting adversaries with concentrated military capabilities, including armored formations or integrated air defense systems. Exhaustion is particularly appealing when the opponent enjoys defensive advantages or local superiority, rendering a decisive armed conflict either prohibitively costly or strategically unpredictable. Intimidation is most effective when the costs of military attack are prohibitive, political objectives are limited in scope, and escalation risks are high, particularly in nuclear or great-power conflict scenarios. Subversion emerges as a particularly attractive strategy in contexts where the target state suffers from internal vulnerabilities, such as political fragmentation, corruption, weak institutions, or international isolation, and where open warfare is politically or legally infeasible.

Taken together, these patterns underscore that the effectiveness of any military tactic is contingent not on its intrinsic superiority, but on the degree to which it is strategically aligned with political objectives, structural conditions, and the broader constraints of the operating environment.

Funding

This study received no specific financial support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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