

Applying Wylie's Cumulative and Sequential Patterns to Air Operations

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Strategist Joseph Caldwell Wylie argued that strategies were implemented through two general types of operational patterns: (1) cumulative warfare, which involves “a collection of lesser actions” where tactical actions gradually built up to have strategic impact; and (2) sequential warfare, which is “a series of discrete steps” where each lead to the next; an example being the island hopping campaign across the Pacific during World War Two (Wylie, 1952).

The Israeli Air Force's (IAF) defensive and offensive actions in its Rising Lion 12-day air war of 2025 usefully illustrates the application and integration of Wylie's operational patterns in the contemporary air domain. In this domain, there are no single decisive battles or moments; air strategists must be patient and far-sighted. Wylie's operational patterns are fundamental when Indo-Pacific strategists plan future air operations.

Cumulative: Ballistic Missile Defence

The defence against Iran's primary strategic weapon, long-range ballistic missiles, involved a pattern of cumulative actions by the IAF. Firstly, air superiority was gained. IAF drones could then, with a reasonable certainty of survival, conduct long-duration stand-in surveillance searching for missile launchers and missile stockpiles. Once found, these were then attacked by armed drones and crewed aircraft. In 12 days, some 400 of about 500 launchers were rendered inoperative (Wald, et al 2025).

Drawing on the earlier True Promise II operation, without such interdiction Iran seemed able to launch more than 200 missiles a day. With interdiction, the launch rate average declined to about 50 a day (Cicurel, 2025). US THAAD and Israeli Arrow systems then intercepted about 85% of the missiles fired (Lair, 2025). The roughly seven to eight remaining missiles either got through the defences or were disregarded as their assessed impact point was in the sea or uninhabited desert.

Even so, the usage of interceptor missiles rapidly depleted the American and Israeli stockholdings (Holiday, 2025). Had Iran's missile launches not been contested, the interceptor supply may have run out and left Israeli cities defenceless. Iran's strategy that relied on deterring Israel through missile attacks failed through the cumulative effect of missile defence actions before and after launch. Numerous individual tactical actions compounded.

Sequential: One step after another

Israel's ability to undertake its 12-day air war rested on the previous two years. Israel had progressively removed distracting threats to its homeland from first Gaza in 2022-23, and then Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2023-24. While, Hezbollah's man-portable anti-air missile threat remained, this was only low altitude and within Lebanese territory.

This then left only Syria's air defences, mainly comprising surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, shielding Iran from large-scale IAF attack. In December 2024, the Syrian civil war ended and the Assad regime fell. Having anticipated this, the IAF quickly launched its pre-

planned large-scale Bashan Arrow operation, commencing with some 350 air attacks against 320 targets within a day (Daoud, 2024). Syrian air defences were rapidly obliterated with some 90% of its medium altitude SAM batteries destroyed (Forey, 2024).

The air route to Iran was now clear. Israeli fighters, tanker and electronic reconnaissance aircraft gained unimpeded access into and through Syrian air space to the Iranian border. The 12-day air war was then the fourth step in the sequence of Gaza, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. Over three years, each step led to the next (Wald, et al 2025). The IAF displayed patience, persistence and long term planning.

Insights

These recent combat experiences can inform the thinking of middle-power air strategists.

First, comprehensive ballistic missile defence requires many individual actions both before and after launch that added together can have strategic impact. Successful defence starts before hostile ballistic missile launch. However, Israel's missile launcher hunting was made much easier by the arid desert environment, clear weather and empty terrain. It would be harder in the Indo-Pacific with its many populated areas, often thick vegetation, high humidity and reduced visibility.

On the other hand, it is now technically possible to reliably shoot down ballistic missiles; it 'simply' requires fielding appropriate defensive systems and having adequate stockholdings. Moreover, Australia's north is effectively an archipelago with only some isolated towns and vital points scattered across large areas of sea and desert (Carr, 2026). Missiles not headed towards those areas may be able to be disregarded.

All this is inherently a complicated endeavour. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of missile defence actions before and after launch can potentially undercut the adversary's strategy.

Second, sequencing is important as not all tasks can be completed simultaneously with the forces available. Middle powers need to use their limited military power in a methodical and prudent manner that is both effective and efficient. Longer-term planning and force preparation can ensure the capabilities required are available when the next step is taken.

Some capabilities Israel needed to undertake the fourth step did not enter service until just before the 12-day air war was planned to start (Wald, et al 2025). An example appears to be Oron, a modified Gulfstream G-550 fitted with radar, electro-optics and SIGINT, that collected detailed intelligence, provided better early warning of Iranian missile and drone attacks, and supported real-time strike management (Israel Aerospace Industries, 2025).

Lastly, for air strategists the key is integrating the cumulative and sequential patterns of operations. In the Israeli case, gaining unimpeded and undisturbed access to Iranian airspace required sequentially stepping through Gaza, Hezbollah and Syria. At each step, many small cumulative air actions were undertaken involving many individual aircraft sorties. Over time the results of these cumulative actions summed together to achieve that step, allowing moving to the next level and towards the final goal: attacking Iran.

The cumulative pattern at each step then becomes critical. The force at the end of each step must be adequate to then advance to the next; prudently managing the resources available and constraining attrition is key. Moreover, the target types selected at each step must be those that will allow advancement; the strategist may choose to focus on specific target sets or attack across a wide variety (Ducharme, 2000).

At times, air power can appear simply to be targeting, a somewhat mechanical process (Meilinger, 1995). Israel's 12-day air war reveals this as somewhat simplistic. Amongst other skills, Indo-Pacific air strategists need to master the integration of Wylie's cumulative and sequential patterns of air operations.

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