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"If a negative aim -that is, the use of every means available for pure resistance- gives is an advantage in war, the advantage need only be enough to balance any superiority the opponent may possess: in the end his political object will not seem worth the effort it costs." Carl von Clausewitz, On War (book 1, p. 94).

Abstract:

The United States' military superiority over Iran has not been enough to achieve decisive political objectives, most notably regime change in Tehran. Although Washington has succeeded in degrading Iran's military, nuclear, and command and control capabilities, the Iranian regime has demonstrated institutional strength, internal cohesion, and control over its population. Ultimately, the Strait of Hormuz has been the central instrument of the regime's strategic coercion: Iran does not need to achieve military victory but rather maintain a credible threat to maritime traffic in order to cut off the energy flow through it, with significant consequences for the global economic system. The combination of dispersed capabilities, drones, missiles, proxies, and escalation management demonstrates that tactical victory may be insufficient to achieve success at the strategic level.

Keywords:

Military superiority, strategic failure, coercion, Strait of Hormuz, strength of the Iranian regime.

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Introduction: the gap between military power and the political objective

The confrontation between the United States and Iran confirms, once again, a constant feature of contemporary strategic history: military superiority does not, by itself, guarantee the attainment of decisive political ends. Washington has demonstrated a clear tactical and operational advantage over Tehran, particularly in intelligence, precision strikes, air and naval superiority, and expeditionary capability. However, that advantage has not been sufficient to bring about the collapse of the Iranian regime or to definitively neutralise its capacity for regional coercion. The explanation lies not only in the configuration and overwhelming size of American military power, but in the relationship between military means, objectives, and political will[1]. When the strategic objective is to transform the nature of power within a state, the destruction of military and industrial capabilities does not necessarily result in political transformation.

Military success and strategic limits

The first limit is the gap between military success and political effect. US and Israeli operations were able to inflict severe damage on military infrastructure, air-defence systems, facilities linked to the nuclear programme, and Iranian command networks. Nevertheless, regime change requires internal conditions that external military action can rarely produce on its own: fractures within the elites, loss of coercive control over the population, sustained social mobilisation, and the existence of a viable institutional alternative. In the absence of these elements, the use of force can degrade the adversary and impose high costs, but it does not necessarily dismantle the political system it seeks to overthrow—still less if it fails to make the regime's political elite perceive that it has no option other than surrendering power[2].

The resilience of the Iranian regime is a second essential factor. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has developed institutions geared primarily towards survival: robust security apparatuses, mechanisms of social control, ideological legitimisation, patronage

1.- See, Blechman, Barry M. and Cofman, Wittes, Tamara, “Defining Moment: The Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy”, Political Science Quarterly, Issue 114, No. 1, Spring 1999, available in https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/psq/psq_spr99.html (access 19/06/2026)
2.- See, Sullivan, Mark P., “Strategic Coercion”, JSTOR, Air University Press,1995, available in https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep13891.6.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Ae9bd800eaf18f0bcd00ab3b5e495da2f&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1 (access 19/06/2026)

networks, and an economy adapted to prolonged sanctions[3]. This architecture enables it to absorb external blows without automatically producing internal rupture. Moreover, hostile military pressure tends to activate nationalist and social-cohesion dynamics, reducing the political space available to opposition sectors and making it easier for the regime to frame the confrontation as a defence of national sovereignty.

In addition, the effects of military force reach their limit when it is used against the adversary's capabilities but not against the centres of gravity of enemy resistance[4]. If the factors sustaining its political will, internal cohesion, or the elements and tools that enable it to influence its adversary are ignored or underestimated, the result may be that military action destroys enemy force without altering the strategic balance. Under such conditions, tactical superiority causes damage but is unable to achieve the political purpose of operations; it imposes costs but does not break the opponent's will, nor does it achieve the strategic objective[5].

Hormuz as an instrument of strategic coercion

The Strait of Hormuz illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. Iran's ability to threaten a critical chokepoint in global energy trade turns geography into an instrument of strategic coercion, into a “centre of gravity”. Thus, the partial disruption of maritime traffic generated systemic effects: higher insurance premiums, more expensive energy, inflationary pressure, market uncertainty, and political tensions among allies. Iran did not need to close the strait indefinitely or defeat the US Navy; it was enough to maintain a credible threat to commercial shipping in order to shift the conflict from the military plane to the economic and political spheres. Thus, from the start of operations and during the

3.- See, Sariolghalam, Mahmood, “Is Iran an Ideological State?”, Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative, 07/2024, available in https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Is-Iran-an-Ideological-State.pdf (access 20/06/2026)
4.- See, Ollivant, Douglas A., “On Will and War”, War on the Rocks, 17/06/2019, available in https://warontherocks.com/on-will-and-war/ (access18/06/2026)
5.- See, Clark, Joseph Roger, “Military Strategy and the Political Dynamics of War”, Military Strategy Magazine/ Volume 10, Issue 1, 2026, available in https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/military-strategy-and-the-political-dynamics-of-war/ (access 17/06/2026)

ceasefire, US naval or air control coexisted with an Iranian capacity for local denial (*sea denial*) that was sufficiently effective[6].

The question of air control over Hormuz reinforces that conclusion. The United States has maintained air superiority in the medium and high layers, but this does not amount to effective dominance over the littoral airspace and low-altitude maritime routes [6]. The persistence of Iranian drones, missiles, and mobile launchers has generated a form of partial denial in the so-called "air littoral": the low layer where coast, sea, commercial traffic, sensors, and short-range threats converge. To obtain real operational control, Washington would have had to neutralise on a sustained basis not only Iran's integrated air-defence system through SEAD and DEAD[7] operations, but also the entire launch chain: intelligence, command and control, logistics, mobile platforms, and dispersed depots.

That requirement poses a first-order operational problem. Iran's architecture is distributed, mobile, and redundant; it does not depend on a few fixed nodes whose destruction would cause system collapse. Locating and destroying mobile launchers requires persistent sensors, near-real-time *targeting*, very short decision cycles, and continuous air presence over sea lines of communication and coastal approaches. In addition, the threat posed by low-cost drones introduces an economic and tactical difficulty: it forces the expenditure of very expensive interceptor missiles, saturates sensors, and reduces the ability to guarantee the protection of maritime traffic. Under these conditions, air superiority may exist in general terms, but it does not assure or guarantee air control over the immediate surface of the sea[8].

Enabling elements and the asymmetry of the threshold for success

The protection of enabling elements is equally decisive. Sustained air dominance depends on early-warning aircraft, aerial refuelling tankers, forward bases, command-

6.- See, Bremer, Maximilian K. and Grieco, Kelly A., "The Strait of Hormuz offers a lesson in air denial", Defense News 01/04/2026, available in https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2026/04/01/the-strait-of-hormuz-offers-a-lesson-in-air-denial/ (access 10/05/2026)
7.- SEAD y DEAD, acronyms for "Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses" and "Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses"
8.- See, Bremer, Maximilian K. and Grieco, Kelly A., "Air denial: The dangerous illusion of decisive air superiority", Atlantic Council 30/08/2022, available in https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/airpower-after-ukraine/air-denial-the-dangerous-illusion-of-decisive-air-superiority/ (access 12/05/2026)

and-control networks, and continuous ISR. If these systems are vulnerable to missile or drone attacks, or to indirect action, the persistence of US military presence over the strait is reduced. The result is a strategic asymmetry: Iran only needs to preserve a residual threat capability to prevent the normalisation of traffic, whereas the United States must achieve the virtually complete elimination of that threat in order to restore freedom of navigation. The threshold for success is therefore much more demanding for the offensive power than for the defending actor.

Iran's management of escalation further expands the problem. Tehran has combined limited kinetic actions with non-kinetic instruments designed to influence Western political will: pressure on maritime routes, selective attacks, energy threats, mobilisation of regional *proxies* (Hezbollah, Houthis), and informational exploitation of the conflict, with a focus on the United States and Europe[9]. This form of warfare shifts the centre of gravity of the confrontation beyond the military theatre and forces Washington to consider not only the operational feasibility of escalation, but also its effects on allies, markets, public opinion, and regional stability; the cancellation of "Project Freedom" 24 hours after its launch is clear proof of this[10]. In this way, a weaker actor can exploit systemic vulnerabilities that constrain the freedom of action of the militarily superior power.

Finally, regime change—the political objective of the campaign—required an internal dynamic that has not materialised. Social protests, economic erosion, and political discontent certainly exist, and to a significant extent, but they have not turned into an organised rupture capable of displacing the ruling elite. Repression, fragmentation of the opposition, the absence of an institutional alternative, and control over the coercive apparatus have prevented external pressure from translating into internal collapse[11]. Moreover, sanctions and attacks have reinforced the regime's narrative, which has presented resistance as the defence of the entire Iranian nation against foreign aggression.

9.- See, Grieco, Kelly A., "Iran Isn't 'Flailing' — It's Executing a Coercive Risk Strategy", Stimson, 13/06/2026, available in https://www.stimson.org/2026/iran-isnt-flailing-its-executing-a-coercive-risk-strategy/ (access 05/05/2026)
10.- See, Gains, Mosheh, Kube, Courtney, Mitchell, Andrea, Lebedeva, Natasha and Arkin, Daniel, "Trump's abrupt U-turn on a plan to reopen the Strait of Hormuz came after backlash from allies", NBC News, 07/05/2026, available in https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trumps-abrupt-u-turn-plan-re-open-strait-hormuz-came-backlash-allies-rcna343845 (access15/05/2026)
11.- See, Zaccara, Luciano, "Iran's 2025-26 protests, resilience and political containment", Real Instituto Elcano, 09/03/2026, available in https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/irans-2025-26-protests-resilience-and-political-containment/ (access 09/05/2026)

Conclusion: military victory and strategic failure

In short, the United States has succeeded in imposing significant costs on Iran, but it has not managed to use its military superiority to force political change in Tehran. The regime's institutional resilience, the effectiveness of its asymmetric strategy, the extraordinary geopolitical value of Hormuz, the dispersion of its military capabilities, the difficulty of achieving useful air dominance in a saturated littoral environment, and the political constraints on resuming military operations explain the strategic failure. Hormuz demonstrates that air dominance today is not sufficient to dominate combat over the surface of the sea, particularly in restricted waters, and that military power can destroy, degrade, and coerce, but by itself it has not been sufficient to create the internal political conditions required for regime change. Thus, against adversaries that are resilient, distributed, and cohesive under external threat, tactical victory can coexist with strategic failure.

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