



A War of Choice Turned into a Strategic Trap

The military campaign launched by the United States and Israel against Iran -initially characterized by airstrikes aimed at decapitating the ayatollahs' regime- seemed to indicate that the technological, aerial, and intelligence superiority of both countries would allow them to achieve their military objectives in the short term. The elimination of a significant portion of Iran's political, economic, and military leadership, who had gathered to decide the position they would adopt in the next round of negotiations in Washington, led Israeli and American leaders to mistakenly believe that their disappearance would facilitate a regime change, as part of the Iranian population had unsuccessfully attempted earlier in January.

The attacks on nuclear facilities, military bases, air defence systems, critical infrastructure, and command and control centres sought to demonstrate that the Islamic Republic lacked the capacity to withstand a prolonged conventional confrontation. However, what initially could be conceived as a limited-objective operation has turned into a confrontation with regional and global consequences. Its final political outcome—still unresolved—shows signs of being unfavourable for the hegemonic great power, the United States.

The first element to analyse in this war lies in the different nature it holds for its protagonists. For Israel, which perceives Iran's nuclear program, missile capabilities, and regional network of allies as fundamental threats to its security and potentially to its very existence, the confrontation acquires an existential dimension. For the United States, by contrast, it is essentially a war of choice: a politically decided intervention without an immediate military threat endangering its territory or its survival as a state. For Iran, however, this war is one of genuine survival for the Islamic Republic's regime, which fights to remain in power, given the terrible consequences defeat would entail. This difference is not minor, because it determines the level of sacrifice each contender is willing to assume and, above all, the length of time each can sustain the war effort. Fundamentally,

it also shapes the degree of support—in terms of effort and resources—that each population and public opinion is willing to provide¹.

Within this logic, Washington appears to have entered a strategic trap with no easy exit. Its military superiority allows it to inflict devastating damage on Iran, but does not guarantee that such damage will translate into the desired political outcomes. For its part, Tehran does not need to militarily defeat the United States to frustrate its strategy. It merely needs to survive, preserve certain response capabilities, and prolong the confrontation beyond the political, economic, and diplomatic costs that the American public and administration are willing to bear². We are therefore facing a profound asymmetry of interests and political will: while Washington needs to demonstrate that it has won the war, Tehran may only need to demonstrate that it has not lost it.

Ultimately, the war has become for the contenders a race against time, although their clocks operate differently. For Iran, the passage of time represents primarily an economic and social threat, as sanctions, infrastructure destruction, and deteriorating living conditions erode its capacity for resistance. For the United States, however, time has become a political threat. In addition, everything seems to indicate that this second dimension could prove to be the most decisive factor in the war's outcome. Iran would only need to resist long enough for the conflict to become politically unsustainable for the American great power.

The Absence of a Defined Political Objective

One of the main problems of the US intervention lies in the difficulty of precisely identifying what political objectives Washington intends to achieve and, especially, what conditions would allow it to declare the war concluded once the desired political end state is reached. Carl von Clausewitz argued that war is the continuation of politics by other means³. This well-known assertion contains the fundamental requirement for any strategy is that military objectives must subordinate to a clearly defined political purpose. When that

1 ANDREW, Mack. "Why big nations lose small wars: the politics of asymmetric conflict", *EWorld Politics*, 1975, 27 (2) pp 175-200.

2 ARREGUIN-TOFT, Ivan. "Why the weak win the wars. A theory of asymmetric conflicts", *International Security*, 2001, 26 (1), pp 93-128.

3 C. VON CLAUSEWITZ, "On War", M. Howard y P. Paret, eds. y trads. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, libro I, cap. 1, § 24.

purpose is ambiguous, shifting, or disproportionate to the means employed, military superiority can become a source of strategic frustration.

US justifications have oscillated among different objectives that are not necessarily compatible. Initially, the possibility of provoking regime change was considered, under the expectation that the destruction of Iran's main repressive and military instruments would facilitate an internal uprising. Indeed, President Trump encouraged the population in the first hours of the war to rise up against the ayatollahs' regime. Subsequently, the discourse shifted toward preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and destroying its uranium-enrichment capability. To this argument, the need to neutralize its ballistic-missile program was added as well as reduce its capacity for regional destabilization⁴.

The problem is that each of these objectives requires a different strategy. Destroying military installations is a task that can be carried out through airstrikes. Permanently, preventing the reconstruction of a nuclear program requires verification mechanisms, international agreements, and sustained monitoring. Achieving regime change requires an internal political transformation whose outcome cannot be guaranteed from the outside. Above all, it requires ground troops -and even then, it is not assured, as recent history demonstrates. Attempting to achieve all these objectives simultaneously through a bombing campaign constitutes an extraordinarily risky strategic gamble⁵.

The nuclear issue deserves particular consideration. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran had accumulated approximately 440.9 kilograms of uranium enriched up to 60% before the June 2025 attacks. Although that percentage remains below the 90% level typically associated with weapons-grade uranium, it represents a highly concerning proliferation capability, because it significantly reduces the time needed to obtain military-grade material. However, possessing highly enriched uranium does not equate to having an operational nuclear weapon, which requires additional design, manufacturing, integration, and delivery capabilities. Moreover, the IAEA has warned that

4 SULLIVAN, Patricia L. "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars", 2007, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(3), pp. 496-524.

5 International Atomic Energy Agency (2025), *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, GOV/2025/50. The figure of 440.9 kg corresponds to June 2025, not to a current 2026 measurement.

access restrictions prevent knowing with precision the current quantity and location of that material⁶.

Nor is it convincing to present Iran's ballistic missiles as a direct and immediate threat to the U.S. continental territory. Iran possesses significant missile capabilities to strike regional targets, including Israel and U.S. bases and installations deployed across the Middle East, but it does not possess an operational and demonstrated intercontinental capability comparable to that of major nuclear powers. The threat exists primarily for U.S. forward-deployed forces and their allies, which is not equivalent to an existential threat against the United States itself⁷.

This confusion between regional threats, potential risks, and immediate dangers has contributed to blurring the political purpose of the intervention. And without a clearly established desired end state, Washington risks continuing to employ force not because a coherent strategy exists to achieve victory⁸, but because halting operations could be interpreted as an acknowledgment that the initial objectives have not been achieved.

The Paradox of a Weakened but Politically Strengthened Regime

One of the most significant consequences of the war may be precisely the opposite of what the purpose intended. Far from necessarily facilitating the collapse of the Islamic Republic, the external military intervention appears to have strengthened its most radical sectors, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has increased its prominence in strategic decision-making and in defining the conditions for any negotiation⁹.

This phenomenon corresponds to a well-known dynamic in international conflicts. An external threat can temporarily reinforce the cohesion of ruling elites; justify extraordinary

6 PEÑA RUIZ, Emilia J. "The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Game Theory," Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, <https://revista.iee.es/es/article/view/749>

7 CEPEDA LUCAS, Luis, "Clausewitz's Theory of War in Counterinsurgency (COIN): Does It Still Hold Validity?" Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, <https://revista.iee.es/es/article/view/232>.

8 Initially, the U.S. administration exerted significant diplomatic and military pressure to force the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, which had been blocked by Tehran's forces. After intense negotiations, U.S. President Donald Trump radically shifted his discourse in June 2026, claiming to have "agreed to allow the Strait of Hormuz to remain open, without any additional naval blockade" due to alleged nuclear concessions by Iran. However, this open posture was abruptly reversed barely three months later; in September 2026, Trump himself made a complete turn by firmly rejecting a formal proposal from Tehran designed to immediately restore navigation in the strait.

9 BUCHTA, Wilfried (2000). "Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic", Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Historical reference on the structure of power, not on the negotiators of 2026.

security measures, and sideline moderate or reformist sectors, whose position becomes weakened in the eyes of those who consider any concession a sign of weakness. The survival of the regime thus becomes the principal criterion of legitimacy within the political system itself¹⁰.

The Revolutionary Guard is not merely a military organization. It constitutes one of Iran's main centres of political, economic, ideological, and security power, with significant connections across the institutional structure and decisive influence over its regional policy. The shift of the internal balance toward its hard-line factions can considerably reduce the room for manoeuvre of traditional diplomatic interlocutors¹¹. The centrality of figures linked to the Guard, such as Mohsen Rezaei, in publicly formulating Iran's conditions regarding the Strait of Hormuz illustrates this hardening, although it does not allow us to conclude that all decision-making mechanisms are exclusively under its control¹².

The strategic consequence is particularly uncomfortable for Washington. The war intended to weaken the regime may have strengthened those who believe that prolonged resistance is the best guarantee of survival. Moreover, Iranian leaders have been able to observe that, despite being militarily inferior, they possess instruments capable of imposing disproportionate costs on their adversaries¹³.

Iran is also aware that pressure on the Strait of Hormuz, the ability to disrupt energy markets, threats against regional infrastructure, the use of missiles and drones, and the activation of networks of allies and armed organizations constitute levers of coercion that do not automatically disappear with the destruction of military installations. Tehran has learned that it does not need to prevail in conventional confrontation to gain negotiating power. It merely needs to demonstrate that it can make the continuation of the war extraordinarily costly.

Furthermore, it would be a mistake to confuse the regime's survival with popular support for its leaders. Iranian society exhibits deep political, generational, economic, and cultural

10 MUELLER, John E. (1970). "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson," *American Political Science Review*, 64(1), pp. 18–34. Comparative application of the concept of cohesion in the face of an external threat.

11 FARNAZ Fassihi, "Hard-Line IRGC Faction Takes Control of Nuclear and Strait Negotiations," *The New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2026. [Online]. Available at: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com). [Accessed: 22 Oct. 2026].

12 ALFONEH, Ali (2013), *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Transforming Iran from Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, AEI Press.

13 "La marina del Cuerpo de Guardias Revolucionarios Islámicos y la guerra naval asimétrica" (2021), Documento de Opinión IEEE, 13/2021.

fractures, and broad sectors have repeatedly expressed their rejection of the political system. However, internal discontent does not necessarily translate into an organized alternative capable of taking power, especially under the effects of foreign military intervention. Opposition to the regime and rejection of external attacks can coexist within the same society. Added to this is a population that—crucial in this type of operation, where winning hearts and minds is fundamental—has suffered greatly in terms of deaths and injuries, generating profound scepticism toward the liberation rhetoric of foreign forces. The occurrence of critical collateral damage to the civilian population—such as the accidental destruction of educational or healthcare infrastructure—immediately undermines the legitimacy of the campaign and catalyses widespread social rejection.

The Multiple Vulnerabilities of the United States as a Superpower

The Persian trap does not lie mainly in Iran's ability to defeat the United States on the battlefield, which is practically impossible in conventional terms. It lies in Iran's skill in exploiting the political, economic and strategic vulnerabilities of the world's leading power. These vulnerabilities are numerous, interconnected and tend to worsen as the conflict continues.

The first vulnerability concerns alliance cohesion. The United States needs regional support, military bases, logistical facilities, intelligence, diplomatic cooperation and access to infrastructure to sustain its deployment. Yet the interests of its allies do not always align. Israel may see continued operations as essential to achieve lasting degradation of Iran's capabilities. The Gulf monarchies fear the consequences of regional escalation, which is damaging their energy infrastructure, their economies and their own security. In fact, the war is severely undermining the confidence and solidity of the US alliance with these Arab monarchies. It has dealt a heavy blow to all of them, weakening their security and stability, and imposing high economic and social costs. European allies must balance their security commitments to Washington with concerns about international legality, energy stability and the economic consequences of a prolonged war¹⁴.

¹⁴ SNYDER, Glenn H. (1997), *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press.

This divergence creates an additional challenge for US strategy. As the conflict drags on, maintaining a cohesive coalition becomes increasingly difficult when its members do not share the same strategic objectives. Iran can use these differences to fragment the opposing diplomatic front and present itself to certain interlocutors as an indispensable actor for any negotiated solution¹⁵.

The second vulnerability is economic. Although the United States has far greater financial capacity than Iran and enjoys considerable energy autonomy, it is not immune to disruptions in the global oil market. Rising hydrocarbon prices increase transport, production and distribution costs, fuel inflation and reduce citizens' purchasing power. The impact also reaches financial markets and growth expectations. The October meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank highlighted the scale of the energy shock and its consequences for a global economy already under significant financial strain¹⁶.

For an administration that had made economic prosperity, reindustrialisation and the defence of national interests the core of its political message, this situation is difficult to reconcile. The Trump administration stated this clearly in its National Security Strategy. A war that raises energy prices and worsens economic expectations creates a contradiction that is hard to manage¹⁷.

Public finances add another constraint. High federal debt and the financing needs of an economy with major structural deficits limit the political room to take on additional military commitments. This does not mean that the United States lacks resources to sustain the war. It means that every increase in military spending competes with other budget priorities in a context where the role of the state and the use of public funds face growing scrutiny.

The third vulnerability is the deep division within American society. The war unfolds in a politically polarised country where a large share of public opinion questions both the need for intervention and the coherence of its aims. The conflict also touches one of the main

15 MUÑOZ PAIRET, Pau, «La doctrina de las grandes potencias en la guerra de la información», Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, <https://revista.ieee.es/es/article/view/6285>.

16 KILIAN, Lutz. "Not All Oil Price Shocks Are Alike: Disentangling Demand and Supply Shocks in the Crude Oil Market", American Economic Review, 2016, 99(3), pp. 1053-1069.

17 MÁRQUEZ DE LA RUBIA, Francisco. «La Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional de los Estados Unidos (2025): análisis y comparativa con la ESN 2022», Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), Madrid, España, Documento de Análisis, 10-dic-2025.

contradictions of the MAGA movement, which built much of its message on rejecting endless wars, reducing external military commitments and prioritising domestic issues over ambitious political projects abroad¹⁸.

The promise to avoid new military adventures is hard to reconcile with an intervention in the Middle East whose costs keep rising and whose end remains uncertain. Part of the electorate that supported Donald Trump because of his criticism of US interventionism may see this war as a repetition of the mistakes he himself denounced. According to an Associated Press report published in October, 69 per cent of Americans believed the war was not worth the cost¹⁹, a highly significant indicator of political wear.

The November 2026 midterm elections add further time pressure. Although the administration denies that the electoral calendar shapes its decisions, it is difficult to imagine that the course of the war will not influence candidates' political expectations, party discipline and Congress's willingness to support new military commitments.

A further, often overlooked military vulnerability lies in the depletion of precision-guided munitions, particularly the interceptors required for air and missile defence. The United States has extraordinary industrial and technological capacity, but its stockpiles are finite and some systems require long production times. A prolonged campaign against relatively cheap missiles and drones can create an economically unfavourable exchange, forcing the use of costly interceptors against threats with much lower unit prices²⁰.

This problem becomes strategic when one considers that the United States must maintain security commitments in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific at the same time. Resources used in one region are not automatically available for another. The war with Iran may therefore indirectly affect deterrence against China, support for Ukraine and US preparedness for contingencies of greater strategic importance. From a grand strategic perspective, the intervention also highlights a contradiction: while Washington identifies competition with China as one of its main strategic challenges in its National Security

18 GELPI, Christopher; FEATHER, Peter D.; REIFLER, Jason (2009). "Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts", Princeton University Press.

19 CBS News, CBS News Poll: June 17–19, 2026, Question 18, June 2026.

20 CANCIAN, Mark F.; KARAKO, Tom; HUNTER, Andrew P. (2023). "Rebuilding U.S. Inventories: Six Critical Systems", CSIS. No cuantifica los consumos de la campaña de 2026.

Strategy, it is again committing military, industrial and political resources to the Middle East, a region from which it had intended to reduce its strategic dependence²¹.

Finally, we must also consider the erosion of international legitimacy. An intervention whose justification shifts over time and which lacks a defined political end state can reinforce the perception that the United States is once again using force without a coherent plan for the post-conflict order. This perception matters in an international system that is increasingly eroded and fragmented, where many emerging powers question the selective application of international norms and show growing reluctance to automatically support Western positions²².

The result is an accumulation of vulnerabilities that Iran can exploit without needing capabilities comparable to those of the United States. Washington retains military superiority, but Tehran can move the confrontation into areas where that superiority loses much of its effectiveness.

Iran and the Levers of Prolonged Resistance

Iran is hardly in a comfortable position either. Its economy has endured years of international sanctions, currency depreciation, inflation, investment difficulties and a substantial deterioration in living standards. The destruction of infrastructure and restrictions on trade and financial transactions exacerbate these weaknesses and threaten to further erode the already fragile support of the social constituencies on which the regime's survival depends. The Islamic Republic may be willing to bear extraordinary costs, but such determination does not imply an unlimited capacity for resistance.

Nevertheless, Iran's principal strength lies in the fact that its strategy does not require a conventional military victory. Tehran may simply seek to preserve the political system, retain sufficient military capabilities to deny Washington a decisive victory, and ultimately force its adversary to accept negotiations on terms less favourable than those initially envisaged.

21 United States Department of Defense (2022), *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.

22 MACKINLAY, Alejandro (2013). «El estrecho de Ormuz y la estrategia de disuasión agresiva de la República Islámica», Documento de Opinión IEEE, 01/2013.

Tehran also retains a network of affiliated regional organisations and actors, which, although weakened by successive confrontations, continues to provide opportunities for indirect pressure. Iran's extensive experience in employing drones, missiles and asymmetric operations enables it to threaten infrastructure, trade routes and military positions without challenging US air superiority. In this context, its ability to adapt and regenerate military capabilities constitutes a strategic asset as important as the number of systems that survive enemy attacks²³.

The Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important energy arteries, plays a particularly significant role. The ability to restrict or disrupt maritime traffic gives Tehran leverage that far exceeds its economic and military power. The October negotiations have demonstrated the extent to which reopening the strait and ensuring safe passage have become central issues in the diplomatic confrontation. Iran has made further progress conditional on meeting its demands, while Washington seeks to link any agreement to commitments concerning the Iranian nuclear programme²⁴.

The irony is that a country facing extraordinary military and economic pressure still retains considerable influence over a substantial share of global energy markets and can shape the decisions of the world's leading power.

Nor should we underestimate the role of China and Russia. Neither power needs to become directly involved in the war to benefit strategically from the erosion of American power and resources. For Beijing, a prolonged US intervention in the Middle East could divert resources and attention away from the Indo-Pacific, although energy instability also threatens Chinese economic interests. For Moscow, the conflict creates diplomatic and strategic opportunities while introducing uncertainties beyond its control. Iran is exploiting its relations with China and Russia to reduce its international isolation, secure support that is proving essential to sustaining its capacity for resistance²⁵ and broaden its diplomatic and commercial options. However, these relationships do not imply an unconditional commitment of support from either power²⁶.

23 TORRES AMURGO, Lluís (2019), "War in the Persian Gulf? Why the United States Will Not Attack Iran", IEEE Opinion Paper, 109/2019.

24 DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco José (2023). «Estrategias de seguridad y defensa en el ámbito internacional», Documento de Investigación IEEE, 02/2023.

25 K. SINGH, E. BANCO y J. LANDAY. "Trump says he does not believe China and Russia help Iran, contradicting US intelligence", Reuters, 13 de octubre de 2026.

26 SÁNCHEZ-REY NAVARRO, Álvaro (2023). "The Russia–Iran Alliance in the Current Geopolitical Context: Vectors of Cooperation and Power", IEEE Opinion Paper, 98/2023.

Taken together, these factors provide Tehran with the means to sustain its resistance, making continued confrontation a far more attractive option than premature concessions. If Iranian leaders conclude that political pressure on Washington is mounting faster than Iran's economic deterioration, they will have strong incentives to harden their negotiating position and prolong the confrontation, even at the cost of substantial domestic sacrifices.

The Race Against Time: Who Can Endure Longer?

Time is probably the decisive variable in this war. The two sides do not rely on comparable resources, but they endure the costs of the conflict through very different political logics²⁷.

The United States can sustain a military confrontation far longer than Iran. However, its political system forces leaders to justify the intervention to citizens at regular intervals. Electoral pressure, rising living costs, public fatigue, internal divisions and allied concerns steadily narrow Washington's room for manoeuvre. The administration needs to show tangible results and, above all, a credible path towards ending the conflict.

Iran operates under a different logic. It has far fewer economic and military resources, yet its leaders view the war as a direct threat to the continuity of the regime. This perception increases their willingness to accept heavy sacrifices, especially when the most radical factions control the main security institutions and believe that any capitulation could endanger their political and personal survival.

Both countries therefore compete in a race of endurance shaped by different constraints. Iran must prevent economic and social deterioration from reaching a level that threatens internal stability. The United States must stop the political cost of the war from outweighing the benefits it can present to its citizens. No one can say which limit will appear first, but the evolution of the conflict suggests that Washington's political margin may tighten before Tehran loses its ability to resist.

This situation creates a difficult dilemma for Washington. A more intense campaign may increase the destruction of Iranian military assets, yet it also raises the risk of escalation, broadens the conflict and strengthens the resolve of the regime's most radical factions. A limited level of pressure may prolong a confrontation that drains resources and erodes

²⁷ RECORD, Jeffrey (2005), "Why the Strong Lose", Naval War College Press.

support. Entering negotiations without achieving the initial objectives may look like a political defeat, especially after presenting the intervention as proof of American determination and superiority.

A diplomatic exit remains possible and probably offers the most rational way to avoid further deterioration. Yet negotiation does not automatically deliver the aims of the war. If the outcome includes the survival of a more radicalised regime, the persistence of significant missile and nuclear capabilities and the need to accept concessions to restore regional stability, Washington will struggle to explain what it achieved through such overwhelming²⁸ military force.

The risk of another strategic defeat

American history offers precedents that should encourage caution. Vietnam and Afghanistan demonstrated that a great power can enjoy overwhelming military superiority and still fail to achieve its political objectives. In both cases, the ability to win battles and destroy enemy forces proved insufficient to secure a favourable strategic outcome.

Iran is neither Vietnam nor Afghanistan, and the differences between these conflicts are too significant to allow for simplistic analogies. What they share is neither the nature of the adversaries nor the conduct of military operations, but rather the difficulty a great power faces in translating military superiority into political victory against an enemy whose principal strategic advantage lies in its determination to resist. Moreover, Iran is a civilizational state²⁹, with well-established institutions, a long historical tradition, indigenous military capabilities and a geographical position that enables it to influence the global economy. The current US intervention also differs substantially from those prolonged ground campaigns. Nevertheless, all three conflicts illustrate the danger of confusing military superiority with the ability to impose a political settlement.

The fundamental problem facing the United States is not a lack of military capabilities to continue striking Iran, but rather the possible absence of a strategy capable of translating

28 BIDDLE, Stephen (2004), *Military Power: "Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle"*, Princeton University Press.

29 M. FOROUGH, "Geographic Agency: Iran as a 'Civilizational Crossroads' in the Belt and Road Geography", in *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Asserting Agency through Regional Connectivity*, F. Schneider, Ed. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 291–314.

military pressure into a stable political outcome. If the war ends without substantially changing the regime's behaviour, achieving a verifiable resolution of the nuclear issue or improving regional stability, Washington will struggle to portray its operational successes as a strategic victory.

The United States must recognise that military success alone does not constitute strategic victory. The ultimate purpose of war is not merely to defeat or weaken an adversary, but to secure political outcomes that leave the country in a stronger strategic position than before the conflict began.

The real Persian trap lies precisely in the difficulty of finding an exit strategy consistent with Washington's declared objectives. Continuing the war increases costs and risks, while withdrawing without achieving sufficient results threatens to turn a demonstration of military strength into an admission of strategic impotence, particularly in the broader context of US strategic competition with China.

The lesson of Vietnam and Afghanistan is not that great powers must inevitably lose wars against weaker adversaries, but rather that military power has limits when political objectives remain ambiguous or exceed what military force can realistically achieve. The United States should remember that the ultimate purpose of war is not simply to inflict severe damage on an adversary, but to achieve a more favourable political situation than the one that existed before the conflict began³⁰.

Finally, it should be noted that this analysis has deliberately focused on the United States as its case study, without examining Israel's position in depth, as its involvement in the conflict follows a substantially different strategic logic. As previously discussed, while for Washington this is a war of choice, for Israel it represents a confrontation that its leaders perceive in existential terms. This perception explains the Israeli government's greater determination to continue military operations until it eliminates what it considers a threat to the very survival of the state, as evidenced by recent statements by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu³¹.

30 SMITH, Rupert (2005), "The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World", Allen Lane.

31 CHASON, L. Soroka, and D. LAMOTHE, "Netanyahu says U.S. and Israel must topple Iranian regime," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2026. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/10/22/netanyahu-says-us-israel-must-topple-iranian-regime/>

This distinction is fundamental since while the United States may regard a negotiated settlement that brings the conflict to an end as an acceptable outcome, Israel appears willing to bear greater costs and prolong the confrontation in pursuit of more ambitious political objectives. This divergence in interests and threat perceptions presents an additional challenge for Washington, which could find itself constrained by an ally whose determination to continue the war exceeds its own. Within this dynamic, the United States thus risks repeating one of the most painful paradoxes in its military history, which is once again winning virtually every battle, yet ultimately losing the war.

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