

Lessons From the Iran Conflict

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving character of modern warfare through the ongoing Iran–United States–Israel conflict, identifying key military, political, economic, and informational lessons. It argues that traditional assumptions about technological superiority and leadership decapitation are increasingly ineffective against resilient, decentralised adversaries. The analysis highlights the growing importance of stockpiles, particularly low-cost drones, and missiles, which can overwhelm expensive defence systems and alter the cost calculus of war. It further underscores the strategic utility of asymmetric capabilities, including naval drones and missile forces, over high-value platforms such as sixth-generation fighters and aircraft carriers. The article also explores the renewed relevance of nuclear deterrence, the expansion of economic warfare targeting critical infrastructure, and the vulnerability of global energy and migration systems. Finally, it assesses the transformation of the information domain where social media challenges traditional narratives. Collectively, these trends indicate a shift towards protracted, multi-domain conflicts requiring adaptive strategies.

Introduction

At the time of writing this article, the United States (US) and Iran have agreed to a temporary ceasefire, but it is too early to state what the ultimate outcome of the conflict will be. Things that can be discussed include the lessons learnt about the weapons

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used, the tactics applied by both sides, and the implications for the conduct of military operations in future conflicts. Some of these lessons have been discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

First, it is significant to understand what the Iranians have been able to achieve in a conflict against two nuclear powers. Tehran has matched the conventional assaults of Israel and the US and, in doing so, struck American targets in the Gulf and delivered missiles on Israeli cities and installations in Dimona and Arad that were meant to be guarded by the David's Sling anti-missile system.¹ Despite lacking an air force, and just having a small navy, the Iranians have been able to block the Strait of Hormuz, as many Indian analysts had pointed out they would, and have been able to significantly impact the global economy. Most importantly, the Iranians have not bowed to the American pressure to agree to a ceasefire on Washington's terms. This may change if America launches a full-fledged land invasion of Iran, since the casualties on both sides would pile up.

Second, the Iranians have shown a national will to fight, much in the way of Ukraine, that the West—particularly the Trump Administration—had completely underestimated. The Trump Administration bought into the Israeli claim that once the Iranian Supreme Leader would be assassinated, the country would fall apart.² Instead, nationalistic sentiments prevailed, and the Iranian population rallied around the regime. Trump was then faced with the choice of a lengthy and expensive land invasion or to try less effective measures like naval blockades and using air power to repeatedly strike targets.

While one cannot discuss the eventual outcome of the conflict, there are quite a few lessons that can be taken from it.

The Myth of Strategic Assassinations

Assassinations have a key part of the offensive strategy for both Israel and the US. The logic behind such a policy says that if you cut off the head of the snake, the body will wither and die. The US forces under Donald Trump ordered the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in 2020, while Israel killed the head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in 2024. More recently, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was assassinated in a joint US–Israeli strike in Feb 2026. While the Western press initially

praised such actions and highlighted the damage they caused, a more sombre and reflective understanding has since emerged. Such actions failed to achieve what was initially assumed to be 'Cutting the head off the snake', as seen through the resurgence of Hezbollah and the ability of Iran to fight even after it lost Ayatollah Khamenei and several other members of the senior leadership on the first day of the conflict. The Iranians, despite facing the considerable setback, were able to continue fighting and launch drones and missiles due to a decentralised decision-making authority in their military.

Worse, the leadership that succeeds is often far more hardline than the one it replaces. As a Wall Street Journal article lamented, what has emerged is "A militarised Iran ruled by a younger, hard-liner leader where the Revolutionary Guard plays an even more dominant role".³ It is believed, for example, that Ayatollah Khamenei's son, unlike his father, may encourage the development of nuclear weapons, leading to an Iran which is a far more dangerous adversary for the West.

The fact is that assassinations have, at best, a mixed record. India itself was a potential victim of such attempt when Pakistan-sponsored terrorists attacked the Indian parliament in 2001 with the goal of killing senior politicians like the then-Prime Minister and Home Minister. India has refrained from retaliating in kind, recognising that wars are ultimately fought between states, and their resolution requires engagement with the leadership of the opposing country—however objectionable those leaders may be. The US and Israeli policies of targeted assassinations have yielded only limited success against groups such as Hamas, Houthis, and Hezbollah, as these actors have often demonstrated resilience and continued to fight, with renewed determination in some cases.

It is likely, however, that other countries will try to adopt the Israeli-American model, although with varying degrees of success. So, countries may now need to include an anti-assassination contingency plan in their military strategies. This would include securing key personnel from potential assassination attempts and making sure that such personnel should not be randomly introduced to foreigners, who can provide actionable intelligence to hostile powers. Iranians believe that it was the International Atomic Energy Agency representatives who provided actionable intelligence on

the identities and whereabouts of Iranian nuclear scientists to Israel and the US. Protecting sensitive personnel, therefore, will have to be a priority of any military campaign in the future.

Relevance of Stockpiles

In past conflicts, the West has used its formidable technological superiority based on precision-guided munitions to overwhelm the defences and offences of much weaker nations like Libya, Syria, and Iraq. But in each of these cases, the actual amount of expended precision-guided munitions did not significantly draw down the western stockpiles of these weapons.

Thus, there was no requirement for a significant expenditure on high-technology weaponry in the second Iraq War or the conflict in Libya, as these were weak opponents who collapsed when they faced a well-trained military. An example of the same was Mosul's abandonment by the Iraqi Army during an onslaught by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the attack on Mosul, ISIS insurgents were primarily aiming to carry out a jailbreak and free detained prisoners. However, in the face of this onslaught, Iraqi forces abandoned their uniforms and fled, leaving the city to the insurgents. Such combat environments do not require employment of large quantities of expensive high-tech weapons.

Things have changed in recent years because of the rise in the number of global conflicts, where determined opponents like Russia, Hamas, and Iran have fought effectively. This created a need for supplying high-technology defensive systems to the Jewish state. During Israel's conflict in 2025, the US and United Kingdom used their naval vessels, fighter aircraft, and defensive missiles to shoot down incoming enemy missiles over Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Western alliance was using USD 400,000-500,000 missiles to shoot down USD 20,000 Iranian Shaheds. The West also employed Patriot interceptor missiles, costing approximately USD 3–4 million each, to intercept significantly cheaper Iranian ballistic missiles. However, that was not the only problem associated with the use of such advanced systems against Iranian weapons.

As US Vice President JD Vance pointed out in a 2024 *New York Times* article, the country was building only 550 Patriots a year, and around 80 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missiles

(THAADs) were being produced annually. Given that the US had to use both systems to shoot at any incoming missile, the stockpile went down quickly.⁴ Consequently, the US decided to increase Patriot missile production to approximately 650 units annually. However, these projections did not fully account for the growing demand arising from conflicts and security requirements across Ukraine, West Asia, and East Asia. This resulted in the US pulling Patriot and THAAD batteries from South Korea to West Asia much to the chagrin of Seoul, which risked the displeasure of China to allow the US to put these systems on their soil.

The shortage is compounded by the fact that these weapons are not easy to build in large numbers. Otherwise, the US would have quickly ramped up production of these weapons to satisfy the requirements of its armed forces and those of its allies.

In contrast, the Iranians have built large stockpiles of missiles and drones, and this has allowed them to prosecute the conflict in a manner of their choosing. Analysts estimate that Iran manufactures 10,000 drones a month at a cost of USD 30,000 per unit (emphasis added), allowing it to shower the Gulf and Israel with these cheap systems.⁵ Most are being shot down, but as mentioned earlier, countering these cheaper Iranian systems requires expensive ammunition. Further, Iran transferred Shahed drone technology to Russia, which subsequently improved the design, produced its own variant, and reintroduced similar enhanced systems under the designation *Geran* (Geranium). These improved drones have greater accuracy and lethality and, when guided by Russian targeting intelligence, are causing difficulties for the US, the Gulf allies, and Israel.⁶

Russia has enhanced the Iranian drones with anti-jamming antennas and greater accuracy via video links that allow for better remote navigation and even limited kinetic self-defence.⁷ While this has increased the unit cost per drone, it has also made them far deadlier, increasing the payload to a 90-kg warhead. With an operational range of 2,500 kms, *Gerans* can readily reach much of Europe and probably Diego Garcia.

Coupled with these low-technology drones is the formidable Iranian missile program. In an excellent Substack article, the Canadian analyst Rupak Chattopadhyay has explained why Iran chose to build ballistic missiles rather than design a new generation

of fighter aircraft, “Due to prolonged Western sanctions, Iran faces severe strategic and technological limitations. Pursuing modern fighter jets—especially fifth-generation stealth platforms like the F-35—would leave Iran roughly two generations (about 50 years) behind leading powers such as the US and Israel. Sanctions block access to key technologies, including advanced jet engines, avionics, radar-absorbent materials, and electronic warfare systems, rendering any domestic fighter program unrealistic and perpetually outdated”.⁸

In contrast, Chattopadhyay writes, “The Iranians decided to pursue an asymmetric approach, centred on ballistic and cruise missiles, supplemented by low-cost swarming drones (such as the Shahed series). These systems can be produced indigenously at scale, stored in underground ‘Missile Cities’, and launched from mobile platforms to saturate and overwhelm enemy defences”. Ballistic and cruise missiles have existed since the German V-1 and V-2 weapons of the World War II and continue to impose a significant toll on an adversary’s defensive systems.

Around the world, countries are, therefore, rushing to build drones and missiles since these can be made in just a fraction of the cost of fighter jets, do not face obsolescence, and require expensive countermeasures. Yet, it is interesting to note that large air forces tend to be conservative and have not worked to bring drones in sufficient numbers into their arsenals, rather banking on the development of the next generation of fighters, which are technologically complex and prohibitively expensive.

The sixth-generation fighters being developed around the world are expected to cost USD 150 mn and upwards, making the acquisition of a sizeable number very difficult; in the Indian context, if the decision is made to produce these aircraft indigenously, the cost is likely to be even higher. Further, as the Iranians have demonstrated, a stealth fighter like the F-35 can be shot down, and this reveals the financial costs of deploying such aircraft in large numbers. On the other hand, a fleet of long-range missiles and drones are, in comparison, not only cheap but, as shown in the case of the Geranium, can be easily tweaked to become far more effective.

Naval Warfare

A similar case can be made in the case of navies, including the Indian Navy, which favours the acquisition of large and expensive capital ships like destroyers and aircraft carriers to project maritime power. While surface ships are necessary, they are not sufficient. The sinking of the IRIS Dena by the US Navy reflects the effectiveness of submarines against surface vessels and debunks the Indian Navy's doctrinal objective of achieving sea control in the Indian Ocean. The US submarine's attack proved that the American Navy is the most powerful force in the Indian Ocean, and it is futile to talk in terms of India achieving sea control in the Indian Ocean.

In the naval context, the Iran conflict reveals the true value of submarines as opposed to expensive surface vessels. Further, missiles have changed the complexion of naval warfare. The US had to pull both of its aircraft carriers further away from the Iranian coastline because it became clear that Tehran's anti-ship missiles could have damaged them. No such action must be taken for submarines since they are difficult to locate underwater, and the range of the missiles they fire continues to increase exponentially. When the next generation of Indian missiles are produced, Indian submarines will not have to leave the country's maritime space since the range will be great enough to hit any target.

The other advancement employed by Iran is the use of naval drones. These were first used in Russia-Ukraine conflict. These drones are small surface vessels that can be used with significant effect in confined maritime spaces, like the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Ukrainian naval drones, named Magura, are fast boats that reach speed of 80 kmph and have successfully taken out several Russian naval vessels. Similarly, the Iranian naval drone fleet has been responsible for hitting several oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, which has compensated for the American Navy's effective defanging of the Iranian surface fleet.⁹ The Iranian military has also built underwater drones, which could be used in lieu of surface naval vessels and submarines as both would be probably easier to track in the confined spaces of the Persian Gulf.

The Utility of Nuclear Weapons

Since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty became law, the common belief has been that non-nuclear states should not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. Despite the edict, four countries—India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel—have crossed the nuclear rubicon and acquired strategic weaponry and associated delivery systems. Yet, recent conflicts have brought out why nations require nuclear weapons as the ultimate provider of defence and strategic autonomy. Former leaders like Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi and Iraq's President Saddam Hussain were unable to produce nuclear weapons despite their efforts, resulting in an end to their regimes as well as their personal lives. In contrast, Kim Jong Un has grown and further developed the nuclear force that his father created, and, despite Trump's best efforts, the North Korean regime remains secure.

Iran's reluctance to cross the nuclear rubicon has put it at a disadvantage in deterring two powers, Israel and the US. If it had taken the next step and gone from its 60 per cent enriched uranium to the 90 per cent enrichment that is required to build a weapon, it would have created a different strategic dilemma for the rest of the world, since it would have made it far more difficult to take aggressive military measures against Tehran. Iran's plans and steps in the future towards becoming a nuclear state remain an open-ended question, as the views of the new regime regarding its potential exercise are unclear. However, it is now clear that other nations in the international system are reconsidering their position on nuclear weapons.

The fact is that several nations are now engaged in active debates about the need to go nuclear. Poland, for example, has started talking about having some sort of nuclear deterrent as it contemplates allowing US nuclear weapons to be based on its soil.¹⁰ In South Korea, a poll revealed that over 70 per cent of respondents favoured an indigenous nuclear weapons program, and this trend may gain ground as the American commitment to defend Seoul is being questioned.¹¹ Even Japan, which is the only nation to have suffered a nuclear attack, is now witnessing a debate regarding the need for nuclear weapons.¹² Ukrainians, similarly, regret their government's decision in the 1990s to give away their nuclear weapons in exchange for a dubious security

guarantee. Thus, it is quite likely that multiple nations may seek to exercise their nuclear option; given that some of these states could be within the Western alliance, it may prove difficult to prevent broader proliferation within the international system.

Economic Warfare

The Russo-Ukraine conflict has witnessed the widespread use of economic warfare, with Russia repeatedly targeting its adversary's electricity grid and critical infrastructure. Similarly, in the Iran conflict, Tehran and Jerusalem have targeted civilian infrastructure as part of efforts to intimidate each other's populations. Tehran has also reportedly destroyed 17 per cent of Qatar's liquified natural gas production facility, an action that will have significant ramifications for global energy supplies in the post-conflict world. Such types of economic warfare are gaining currency in modern conflict but, instead, they must be condemned by international community as a crime against civilians.

In Operation Sindoor, the Indian Prime Minister gave explicit orders that only military targets would be attacked in the conflict. This is how conflicts should be fought, as both sides are vulnerable to an attack on their economic targets, including power stations, dams, and communications centres. Doing so leads to greater devastation and makes post-war recovery lengthy and expensive. Energy experts are already speculating about the time it will take to restore oil and natural gas production in the Gulf to pre-conflict levels and, in the interim, the amount of damage that the shortage of energy supplies will inflict on the global economy.

Also, nations engaging in economic warfare need to understand that this act will eventually blow up in their face in a post-conflict world, both diplomatically and politically, since nations will seek to diversify energy supplies from the Gulf. One possible lesson from the Iran conflict is that it could spur the emergence of a global consensus around a treaty defining what constitutes legitimate targets in future wars.

The problem for the Gulf states is that if the conflict escalates, destruction of their economic targets will not only have a developmental impact but even perhaps an existential impact if the Iranians destroy the desalination plants and the electricity grid of the Arab countries. The destruction of desalination plants would

render these nations uninhabitable, as would the obliteration of their electricity grids, given that modern populations in these regions rely heavily on climate-controlled environments. Additionally, any such economic attack would have a devastating impact on the post-oil development plans of states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As discussed below, all these nations see themselves as being a part of the global services economy but that requires long-term peace, a well-trained labour force, regional stability, and a first-rate infrastructure. All of these would be threatened by the advent of sustained economic warfare and hence, these countries are fearful about escalation of the conflict.

Immigration and the Gulf War

There is another side to economic warfare that is particularly important in the context of the Gulf—immigrants have been responsible for building up the modern infrastructure and economy in these nations. For a country like the UAE, around 90 per cent of the population are foreigners, who have been responsible for construction, services, and upper-end jobs that have allowed Dubai to claim itself as ‘Singapore of the West Asia’. Dubai also became the playground of the rich as wealthy people have purchased real estate in the fancy neighbourhoods of the Gulf state. Now, with the destruction caused by the conflict, these immigrants are migrating away from the country, and there is no guarantee of their return.

Before 1973, Lebanon was the financial and entertainment centre of the West Asia as wealthy Arabs deposited their money in Lebanese banks, while tourists and locals partied on the beaches of the country. Lebanon’s francophone culture and westernised appearance made it extremely attractive to the rest of the region until the Lebanese civil war began. As a result, Lebanon’s reputation as a safe haven in an increasingly volatile West Asia eroded, prompting significant capital flight from the country. Lebanon’s elite applied for dual nationality in countries like Canada and Australia. 50 years later, the country has still not bounced back to its good times.

The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have all drawn up plans for a post-oil and gas scenario where they act as centres of services and tourism. This requires all these countries to exist

within a politically stable region. Global multinationals like Goldman Sachs, Apple, and Microsoft would probably not continue to function in a region where the threat of war breaks out every six months. This would mean that they are not likely to invest or send their best personnel. This creates an opportunity for other countries, particularly India, which has trained personnel, to enter and help rebuild and stabilise these countries.

In a post-war situation, the Indian government needs to renegotiate the terms and conditions under which Indians are employed in the Gulf. There exist stories abound of Saudis, Qataris, Emiratis, and others mistreating Indian workers—white collar or blue collar—both legally and illegally. The time has come to change these terms and conditions. It is imperative that Indians employed in these countries should be working under International Labour Organization rules and regulations. This would be a breakthrough, and it would help the Gulf states because they need to realise that if they are striving to be modern service-oriented societies, they need to abide by the rule of law, particularly international labour law.

The Information War

In both Gulf Wars I and II, the Western alliance had a monopoly on global media outlets, and the internet had not reached its true potential. Consequently, the West was able to shape the media narrative and ensure that their version of the story, narrated using embedded journalism, became the universal version of truth. Thus, the wars were spectacular military successes, and it made the use of force an easy activity with few adverse consequences.

The insurgency in Iraq changed that; while George W Bush and Barack Obama were declaring victory, Americans were seeing their relatives return home in body bags or, worse, as the walking wounded who would require expensive medical care for a lifetime. Thus, while *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* acted as cheerleaders for the American administration, American population was being increasingly exposed to the true cost of the war on social media.

A comparable situation emerged with the outbreak of the Gaza conflict. While the mainstream print and television media was pro-Israeli, social media platforms become the source for

getting their news. These platforms exposed the human costs and brutality of the conflict, leading many younger Americans—who constituted a significant portion of TikTok’s user base—to adopt a more pro-Palestinian stance.

In the current conflict, both the Western and Arab media are giving a stilted version, which does not stand true to all facts. Iranian strikes on the US bases in the Gulf have often been downplayed, while those carried out by Israel and the US have been accorded full credence, including claims that most of Iran’s missile launchers have been destroyed. The problem with this approach is that, over time, the target audiences of such media broadcasts—the American and Arab publics—will realise that they are being fed inaccurate information and begin to seek alternative sources. The beginning of this realisation is already visible, as most of the Americans do not see Iran as an existential threat, and they do not approve of the US involvement in the Iranian conflict. Presenting the war in a way that it is believable to the domestic public will be a crucial element of fighting wars in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whatever the outcome of Iran conflict is, it has had a major impact on the shape of modern warfare, and the lessons are military, political, economic, and media oriented. Militaries will have to remember these lessons in their future planning.

Endnotes

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