FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 30.07.2026 | Muamer Bećirović

The new logic of war

The war in Iran has shown that the cost dynamics of modern warfare are no longer the same as they were just a few years ago

In the end, it always comes down to a handful of people in a room. In their book *Regime Change*, White House correspondent Jonathan Swan and his colleague Maggie Haberman reconstruct the key moments that led the United States into the war with Iran. According to the pair, the decision was based on several recent developments: the rapid success of the US intervention in Venezuela; the Israeli strikes against Iran's proxy organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas; and the absence of any serious Iranian retaliation following the Israeli-American attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2026.

The Trump administration's gut feeling that the regime would fall, and its ambition to go down in history as the administration that brought down the Islamic Republic, further contributed to this. Swan and Haberman believe that Israel's role in this is greatly overestimated. Trump had always been a hawk on Iran. Whilst the CIA and Secretary of State Marco Rubio considered the decapitation of the Iranian leadership and the elimination of Iran's missile arsenal to be feasible, they regarded Netanyahu's regime-change scenarios as pure fantasy. Chief of the General Staff Dan Caine, for his part, presented the pros and cons in such a balanced manner that no one could tell what he was actually advocating. The rest of the inner security team, Rubio and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, spoke out vehemently in favour of intervention. Only Vice-President JD Vance stood alone in opposing it. Trump ultimately decided in favour of war.

What the Americans had underestimated had long been predicted by some of their quietest and wisest military strategists. The increasing proliferation of high-precision missiles has heralded a new era in warfare and power projection. With land and sea bases all over the world, as well as its aircraft carriers, the United States has created the most mobile military force in history. Thanks to superior technology, even small numbers of precision-guided missiles are intended to destroy the enemy's entire military capability and bring the war to a swift end. At least, that is

the American doctrine.

The cost is too high

It is true that the US dominates the skies and the seas. Yet it has been unable to defeat Iran militarily, let alone politically. This is because military bases are only of use for as long as they can withstand sustained fire — or until the war is won before the missile depots run dry. Iran has shown that neither of these conditions can be met. Using mass-produced drones, it has been able to overwhelm US air defences, using ballistic missiles to destroy whatever the defences allow through: the expensive military equipment and the bases that support it. This causes the supply lines to ground troops to collapse, just as those to ships do. The result: aircraft carriers are stationed hundreds of kilometres away from the action for fear of being sunk. Taken together, this effectively brings an end to classical military power projection.

Although there are no exact figures, we know that Iran produces dozens of offensive weapons every month – and at a fraction of the cost incurred by Israel and the United States combined. This ratio alone is enough to gain the upper hand. Offence has thus become fundamentally cheaper than defence. The Americans have built up a military force optimised for projection of power and striking capability, not for withstanding sustained fire. Iran's technology is not superior, but the cost curve for defence has become ruinous, as simply too few defensive missiles are being produced.

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America's armaments were never designed for mass production, but for technical superiority. The enemy would be defeated before ammunition ran out. The idea that Iran could withstand a sustained bombardment and strike back with sustained fire – indeed, even destroy American positions – was unthinkable to the US military. Not because this scenario had been analysed and rejected, but because technological change and its consequences were not taken seriously.

Iran has not only recognised this shift but has made it a cornerstone of its strategy — a masterstroke of warfare that Europe would do well to study. Tehran recognised the historic moment when missiles and drones became superior to conventional military technology. The Iranians identified the structural weakness of the US military, its lack of mass defence capabilities, and channelled all their resources into exploiting

precisely this vulnerability.

From a tactical perspective, the US may remain superior: better technology, greater firepower and dominance of the air and sea. Strategically, however, Iran has triumphed. The Iranian regime has succeeded in depriving the United States of its capacity for escalation. And using the very same means by which it is dismantling American power projection, it can wipe out the oil infrastructure of the entire Middle East and drag the world down with it. It may be that cheaper interception systems will be developed in large numbers in the future and that we are living through a historic transitional phase in which defence is catching up again. However, as long as no technology exists that can strip Iran of this advantage, the war will be decided at this stage.

Military history is full of those rare moments in which a technological or organisational innovation overturns the established rules of warfare and destabilises the existing balance of power.

For this reason – and this reason alone – Iran can remain unyielding and dictate the terms of peace to the United States. For Washington no longer has the option of further escalation; Trump tried it and failed. The problem here is not solely the Strait of Hormuz, through which around a fifth of the world's traded crude oil is transported. What is decisive is the willingness to go further. Washington has realised that Tehran would be prepared to accept a global depression should the regime itself be threatened. That settles the conflict. Whatever compromise may ultimately be reached, it will expand Iran's strategic room for manoeuvre. Perhaps not in the short term. In the medium and long term, however, certainly.

Iran has demonstrated what is required not only to keep a major power at bay, but also to strategically neutralise its military superiority. Military history is full of those rare moments in which a technological or organisational innovation overturns the established rules of warfare and destabilises the existing balance of power. Napoleon gained the decisive advantage in the Wars of the Coalition through his mobile corps system. American mass production of aircraft and warships decided the outcome of the Second World War and shaped the post-war world order. Those who recognise the historic moment at which the logic of war changes, and consistently adapt their armed forces accordingly, gain a strategic advantage.

Whether the dominance of drones and missiles marks such a lasting turning point or merely a transitional phase in which defence is catching

up technologically cannot yet be determined. One thing is already certain, however: the war in Iran has shown that the cost dynamics of modern warfare are no longer the same as they were just a few years ago. Future great powers will therefore have to measure their military strength not solely by the quality of their weapons, but by whether they can strike a new balance between attack and defence. Whoever understands this new logic first will shape the wars of tomorrow.



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