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Twilight of the hegemon

Trump's war with Iran was intended to weaken Tehran. Instead, it has ended in a geopolitical debacle for Washington

A bad end is better than a never-ending nightmare. From this perspective, US President Donald Trump's efforts to extricate himself from the disaster of his own making are, at the very least, commendable. Even if the details of a deal are not yet fully known, it is clear that America has had enough and that Trump evidently wants to escape the escalation trap that would have far more severe consequences for everyone involved, but above all for the global economy.

Only the most loyal would dispute that this war is ending in a strategic defeat for the world power. America has not been so humiliated since the withdrawal from Vietnam. Virtually all the grandiose war aims have been missed. Regime change: nowhere to be seen. The nuclear issue: unresolved. Iran's military capabilities: scarcely seriously curtailed.

It is even more disastrous: A state that stood before the ruins of decades of strategy is now back in the region as a player to be reckoned with. Possibly even as a contender for hegemony in the Gulf. A regime that was effectively doomed, which could only keep its own rebellious people at bay through sheer force, is now fully revitalised and radicalised. With Hormuz, Iran has found a 'nuclear option' which – unlike the bomb – is actually deployable. With minimal effort, the regime can hold both the Gulf and the entire global economy hostage.

The revival of the nuclear question

This has permanently altered the geopolitical equation in the Gulf. Contrary to what some amateur strategists claim, the Strait of Hormuz cannot be bypassed. Whilst the Gulf states can build pipelines, their oil and gas fields remain within range of Iran's highly efficient missile arsenal. An anti-Iranian regional order is therefore simply no longer possible, or at least only at the cost of a major conflagration. Most Gulf states realised this long ago and are striving for de-escalation. Their worst

pre-war fears have all come to pass. An Iran pushed to the brink has lashed out wildly.

Contrary to all assumptions, the American military bases – now largely reduced to rubble – have proved not to be a protection but a liability. Washington was just as incapable of defending them as it was of letting its Gulf allies down. Disillusionment with the Americans' strategic incompetence has reached unprecedented levels. The fact that Trump is now also calling on regional states to join the Abraham Accords with the utterly isolated Israel as a 'thank you' for this disaster can only be seen as a mockery. For any government, that would be political suicide.

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That reckless war has permanently eroded America's deterrent. As a result, the nuclear issue has become dangerously topical. To prevent war, the regime was prepared to make far-reaching concessions. Now it has learnt its lesson: not only can it survive a war, but it also knows that America is incapable and unwilling to deploy the means that would make regime change possible in the first place

Ayatollah Khamenei, an old, predictable, risk-averse man, took his anti-nuclear fatwa to the grave. The regime now taking shape is significantly more radical and risk-seeking, whilst at the same time less theologically driven and far more militaristic. More nationalism, a little less Islamism — that is the new formula. And if it no longer fears US military power, what on earth should stop it from reaching for the bomb? The fact that both America and Israel are behaving in a completely lawless manner only makes the bomb all the more attractive. Consequently, from the regime's perspective, it would be almost foolish to do without it. The consequences, however, extend far beyond Iran. Nothing less than a global arms race looms.

Broken promises and questionable allies

The erosion of American deterrence has consequences for the whole world. If the US military reaches its limits after just a few weeks of war against a medium-sized power that is subject to maximum sanctions and globally isolated, who can still believe that it can defend Taiwan against a possible takeover by the industrial superpower China? Beijing has now been able to study, live and in colour, how the US armed forces conduct warfare. It was able to revel in the massive withdrawal of equipment from

East Asia in order to remain operational in the Middle East at all. Iran, hitherto not a particularly valued partner, has proven its worth to the People's Republic — for future reconstruction, this is anything but irrelevant. Beijing sits on the world's largest strategic oil reserves and is therefore in no hurry regarding the outcome of the war. Especially since the Strait of Hormuz was never completely closed to China.

The war is also eroding what remains of America's soft power. That was always the world power's great advantage: despite all reservations, it was regarded by many as a place of longing. Now, even in the global propaganda war, it must admit defeat to what is essentially an ossified Islamist regime. After all, media savvy was long regarded as the last trump card of the amateurish bunch in Washington. The image of the benevolent hegemon is also a thing of the past. Anyone who blindly puts the economic welfare of entire continents at risk has long since lost the hearts and minds of the global public.

Key allies with a reach of millions are now turning their backs on a president who has broken his election promise to end the Forever Wars.

On the domestic front, the Iran debacle is likely to herald the end of Trumpism. Iran would thus have achieved the feat of politically bringing down a second US president after Jimmy Carter. Trump's approval ratings are at an all-time low. Millions of US citizens are staring into an economic abyss. If Clinton's famous quip 'It's the economy, stupid' still holds any weight, Trump's Republicans are heading for a landslide defeat in the November congressional elections. After that, the US president is likely to find himself a lame duck, fighting for survival amidst domestic political turmoil.

With his ill-advised attack on Iran, Trump has shattered his MAGA coalition. This, too, has lasting implications for the overall geopolitical situation in the Middle East. It was Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu who dragged Trump, who was riding high on the euphoria of his victory in Venezuela, into this war. Making himself the agent of neo-conservative fantasies actually runs counter to the instincts of the populist from New York. After all, he once stood as a lone warrior against the Republican war establishment.

Key allies with a reach of millions are now turning their backs on a president who has broken his election promise to end the Forever Wars. Even the recently published National Security Strategy spoke of withdrawing from the conflicts in this crisis-ridden region. However, any strategy crumbles in the face of a president who, despite all the ideological

whitewashing by his apologists, really knows only two fundamental political constants: selfishness and megalomania.

Where do you stand on Israel? The trend is moving towards 'Carlsonism', a kind of post-Trump Trumpism, albeit ideologically far more consistent than the original.

A civil war is now raging on America's right between the neoconservative establishment, which seduced Trump, and the anti-globalist internet right, embodied by no one better than the opinion journalist Tucker Carlson. The crucial question is: where do you stand on Israel? The trend is moving towards 'Carlsonism', a kind of post-Trump Trumpism, albeit ideologically far more consistent than the original.

Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to become yet another casualty of this war, following in Trump's footsteps. That would be a first for this politician, who seems to have seven lives. Already a dead man walking, he returned after 7 October and for a long time looked like the great geopolitical winner who had outmanoeuvred Iran. Now, however, he could go down in history — not only as the gravedigger of the former bipartisan consensus on unconditional American support for the Jewish state, but also as the man who lost what he himself described as 'the woke Right'.

Netanyahu's strategy after 7 October was to reshape the entire Middle East, thereby transforming it into a chaos devoid of sovereignty, into a terrain that could be bombed at will, dominated by the military-technological superiority of a small state of ten million people. This hubris is now colliding with reality. The illusion of a Pax Judaica imposed on the Middle East could only work as long as the US, as a world power, granted Tel Aviv unconditional military protection. Should this protection be withdrawn in the near future, Israel would likely find itself in a political sobering-up cell. Whether Netanyahu's potential successor, Naftali Bennett – himself a pure product of the settler movement, who recently declared Turkey to be the 'new Iran' – will come to his senses there is, of course, another matter entirely.



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