The Paradox of Supremacy
Military Dominance and Strategic Stalemate in the 2026 US–Israel–Iran War

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Abstract

The war that erupted in late February 2026 — fought by the United States (US) and Israel against Iran under the operational names Epic Fury, Lion's Roar, and True Promise IV — offers a stark test of an old strategic question: can overwhelming military dominance be converted into a political decision against an adversary that refuses to fight on those terms? This article argues that, in this war, it could not. The coalition achieved near-total military supremacy, seizing command of the air within seventy-two hours and winning almost every measurable engagement. However, the campaign settled into a stalemate rather than a decision. Iran's strategic resilience — through dispersal, redundancy, and societal endurance — enabled it to absorb punishment and resist collapse despite isolation and sanctions. AI-enabled targeting, drone saturation, and synthetic-media campaigns turned the war into a contest of perception as much as destruction. Great-power backing and chokepoint economics sustained Tehran and left the April ceasefire an armed pause rather than a peace. Methodologically, the article continues by conceptual synthesis and comparative historical interpretation rather than empirical testing, triangulating open sources and grading evidence by confidence rather than treating wartime figures as settled fact. On this basis, the article distils five propositions and draws lessons for African and other middle-power defence planners. Outcomes now hinge less on platform counts than on magazine depth, systems integration, sustainment, and narrative resilience.

Keywords: *Strategic Stalemate; Military Dominance; Cognitive Warfare; National Resilience; Geopolitical Competition; War Termination; Strategic Autonomy.*

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1.0 Introduction

Few propositions in strategic studies are more durable than the reminder that battlefield dominance does not guarantee political control. The 2026 conflict — Operation Epic Fury, Lion's Roar, and True Promise IV — reaffirmed this principle on both regional and global scales. The asymmetry was stark with near-total air superiority and unmatched precision-strike capability on one side, and a sanctioned, isolated state on the other. Engagements consistently favoured the coalition, yet political decisions remained elusive and military command of the battlespace did not translate into command of the peace.

The gap between operational dominance and strategic success is the paradox of supremacy, and it is the puzzle this article addresses. How did a coalition with overwhelming military, technological, intelligence, and economic superiority fail to secure a decisive political outcome? The answer lies in the weaker party's choices. Recognising the firepower contest was unwinnable, Iran never tried to win it. Instead, Tehran employed horizontal escalation, asymmetric denial, and cost-imposition, transforming a localised decapitation strike into a regional crisis and ultimately a global confrontation (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026; House of Commons Library, 2026). Escalation extended into a sixth domain alongside land, sea, air, space, and cyber — the cognitive battlespace—where, more than a hundred days after the opening salvo, the war continued.

This analysis contends that technological superiority, precision strike, and intelligence dominance, for all their destructive power, could not compel a political decision from an opponent practising strategic resilience, horizontal escalation, economic coercion, and cognitive warfare. The article offers interpretation rather than settled history, given that the conflict is too recent and its facts too contested to draw definitive conclusions. The aim is to explain the paradox and trace the military, political, economic, technological, and strategic dynamics that

shaped both the conduct of the war and its inconclusive end. Sequencing, sustainment, resilience, and perception management explain the outcome more reliably than any tally of platforms destroyed.

1.1 Research Methodology and Evidentiary Framework

Any assessment of this war must begin with a caveat about evidence. It is an active, doubly censored conflict in which all sides conceal or distort losses, leaving most quantitative measures as ranges rather than facts. This analysis addresses that difficulty by triangulating four streams of evidence —think tank assessments, official statements and legal instruments, journalistic reporting, and verifiable open-source or machine-processed imagery and data. Sources are weighted by corroboration and read for implications rather than certified as fact.

The method is comparative historical analysis, not empirical testing of datasets. The 2026 war is examined against strategic bombing in the Second World War (1939-1945), Vietnam, the Gulf War (1991), and Kosovo (1999) — each a step-change in precision that carried the same expectation of decision through dominance. The five propositions offered in the conclusion are distilled inductively from where the 2026 case confirms, extends, or breaks that pattern. In a war managed this heavily by every side, uncertainty is best treated as a defining feature of the subject rather than a flaw to be eliminated.

2.0 Causes and Strategic Context

2.1 The Nuclear Question and Preventive War

The immediate trigger was a joint US–Israeli surprise air campaign on 28 February 2026, launched after nuclear negotiations collapsed in the wake of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the June 2025 “Twelve-Day War.” Declared objectives included dismantling Iran’s nuclear and missile infrastructure, decapitating its leadership, and pursuing regime change (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026). The timing

made it a textbook case of preventive war — action taken against a feared trajectory rather than an imminent threat.

Iran entered the conflict already weakened: sanctions had eroded its economy, the June 2025 strikes had inflicted lasting damage, proxy networks had faltered during the Gaza war, and domestic unrest in early 2026 had sapped resilience. Washington and Jerusalem judged the moment opportune but miscalculated. Arms control specialists argued that the June 2025 campaign had already rendered key enrichment sites inoperable, undermining claims of imminence (Institute for Science and International Security, 2025; Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Nuclear Network, 2025).

2.1 Regional Security Competition

The rivalry's roots lie in 1979, when the revolution transformed Iran from an Israeli partner to an adversary. For four decades, antagonism centred on Iran's nuclear programme, expanding missile arsenal, proxy networks, and Israel's refusal to tolerate a regional nuclear-capable rival. Each side interpreted deterrent postures as offensive intent, sustaining a security dilemma with little scope for reassurance.

2.2 Regime Survival versus Regime Change

The two sides were never fighting for the same stakes, and that mismatch shaped everything that followed. For Washington and Jerusalem, the war was about regime change — treating Iran's government as something that could be removed. For Tehran, it was about survival. That difference mattered because a war of choice for limited objectives looks very different from a war of survival fought over non-negotiable stakes. It explains why Iran was willing to absorb punishment and why reaching terms later proved so difficult.

2.3 From Crisis to War

In policy circles, the earlier 2026 seizure of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas was frequently cited — sometimes cautiously or speculatively — as

evidence that coercive regime-change operations could succeed under the right conditions. However, beyond broad chronological proximity, the comparison quickly breaks down. The Venezuelan case involved a far smaller security apparatus, fragmented elite loyalties, and limited external support, none of which held for Iran. The divergence underscores how analogies can mislead as much as they clarify, and the question of whether the law could regulate force on this scale emerged as the war's first contested front.



Plate 1. *Smoke rises over Tehran in the opening hours of the coalition air campaign, 28 February 2026. Source: open-source/social media imagery, attribution unverified.*

3.0 Legitimacy, Preventive War, and Strategic Narrative

3.1 Preventive War and Competing Claims of Self-Defence

Disagreement over the legal basis of Operation Epic Fury emerged immediately. The debate turned less on the text of UN Article 51, which protects the inherent right of self-defence, than on how far anticipatory self-defence could be stretched before collapsing into prevention.

Washington advanced a cumulative case — years of proxy attacks, collective defence at Israel's request, and the risk of nuclear breakout (United Nations, 1945; U.S. Department of State, 2026; McBrien, 2026). Critics countered that none amounted to an imminent armed attack, especially given assessments that key enrichment sites had already been degraded. Striking during ongoing negotiations, removing senior leadership, and explicitly pursuing regime change were therefore widely read as preventive force rather than lawful pre-emption ("An Unserious Justification," 2026; Greenwood, 2003). Measured against the Caroline standard — necessity that is "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means" — the case remained strained (Greenwood, 2003). The difficulty lay less in identifying a long-term threat than in proving that the threshold for immediate action had been crossed.

At home, the dispute took constitutional form. Although war powers reside with Congress, Epic Fury proceeded under Article II authority and exceeded the War Powers timetable. Drawing on precedents from the Libya intervention, the executive classified sustained air operations as short of "hostilities," thereby avoiding withdrawal requirements. With INS v. Chadha (1983) having removed the legislative veto, Congress lacked effective enforcement, and Senator Jacob Javits's 1973 warning about "drift into foreign wars without the collective judgment of Congress" resurfaced almost verbatim in contemporary criticism.

3.2 Legitimacy as a Strategic Resource

Comparison with Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya situates Epic Fury within a broader pattern of weakening legal constraint (Van Stensel, 2026). Across these cases, Security Council authorisation was bypassed, contested, stretched, and ultimately abandoned (Table 1), while domestic authorisation shifted inconsistently between absence, approval, and reinterpretation. Together, they reveal not an isolated controversy but a steady institutional drift towards executive war-making.

Table 1. *The evolution of contested interventions, 1999–2026.*

Intervention	UN Security Council	Congressional authorisation	Principal criticism
Kosovo (1999)	None — Russian/Chinese vetoes	None; funded, ran past the 60-day clock	"Illegal but legitimate" humanitarian action without authorisation
Iraq (2003)	None — disputed revival of 678/687/1441	Yes — the 2002 Iraq AUMF	Preventive war lacking legal basis; the WMD case collapsed
Libya (2011)	Yes — Resolution 1973 (R2P)	None — deemed not "hostilities"	Mandate exceeded as it drifted into regime change
Epic Fury (2026)	None — an Article 51 claim only	None — Article II alone; WPR (War Powers Resolution) votes defeated	Preventive force; neither international nor domestic authorisation

Source: Author's construct

Historical experience also shows that legality alone rarely determines legitimacy. Kosovo retained support despite ambiguity, Iraq lost it despite authorisation, and Libya eroded it despite a mandate. Legitimacy functions instead as a strategic resource — support, cohesion, and consent (Buzan et al., 1998). Entering the conflict with uncertainty on both international and domestic fronts, the coalition found that battlefield success could not, by itself, resolve doubts about its purpose or authority.

3.3 The Battle for International Narrative Dominance

Because legitimacy is publicly contested, legal ambiguity quickly becomes narrative vulnerability. Coalition claims of counter-proliferation sat uneasily alongside the declared aim of regime change, enabling Tehran to frame the war as unlawful coercion (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026; Center for International Policy, 2026) — a framing that resonated strongly with non-Western audiences already sceptical of intervention narratives. Competing interpretations spread through state media, diplomatic forums, and online platforms, shaping how third parties understood both the causes and conduct of the war. Law itself thus became an operational line of effort: the missing Security Council mandate was a targetable vulnerability, and Tehran's information campaign exploited it relentlessly, converting the Article 51 controversy into a diplomatic and reputational defeat across much of the non-Western world. How this contest functioned as warfare in its own right is theorised in Section 9.

4.0 Coalition Versus Network: Competing Strategic Systems

The force that prosecuted *Epic Fury* was far narrower than the image of a "Western war on Iran" and far smaller than the expeditionary alliances of 1991, 2001, or 2003. There was no North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) command structure, no Article 5 invocation, and no formal alliance campaign. States adopted divergent postures, producing a hierarchy: the US as global spearhead, Israel as regional high-technology hegemon, the United Kingdom as defensive shield, and continental Europe split between reluctant enablers and outright opponents. The coalition was opposed by a distributed system organised less around conventional symmetry than around resilience and dispersion (Figure 1).

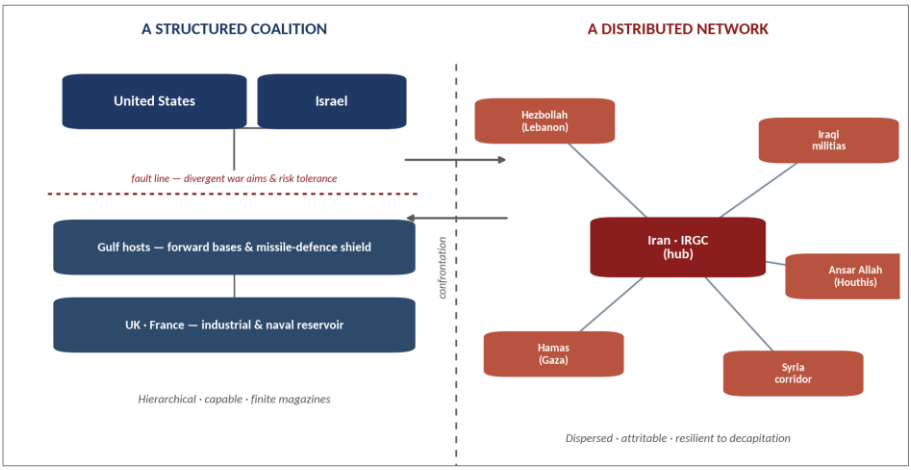


Figure 1. *A coalition versus a network: a centralised, hierarchical command on one side; a dispersed, attrition-minded network on the other. Source: Author's elaboration.*

4.1 The US–Israel Coalition

The US and Israeli command structures mirrored each other, each led by three principals—a political head, defence chief, and intelligence director — producing a tightly centralised partnership (House of Commons Library, 2026). Britain's role illustrates coalition ambivalence. It initially refused US requests to join the offensive or provide bases, insisting on negotiation. Within days of Iranian retaliation, however, Royal Air Force (RAF) Typhoons and F-35s were folded into coalition air defence, and base access was granted under a narrow legal formula permitting only "defensive degradation strikes." The Royal Navy added maritime assets, while continental Europe fractured, France withholding offensive participation but deploying naval forces; Germany offering staging through Ramstein; Spain remaining critical; Italy and Greece serving as logistical hubs. These contradictions revealed governments enabling operations they publicly opposed, with basing agreements outpacing political consensus.

Gulf partners were drawn in involuntarily because they hosted US assets that made them targets. Under *True Promise IV*, Iran struck seven

countries in forty-eight hours. Its missiles hit Al Udeid (Qatar), Al Dhafra (UAE), the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, bases in Kuwait, and Ain al-Asad in Iraq, where three US service members were killed — the first American combat deaths of the war. The costliest strike destroyed a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) radar in Jordan, one of only nine globally (House of Commons Library, 2026). High interception rates did not prevent Iran from demonstrating that hosting coalition forces regionalised the war and pulled it onto Gulf soil.

4.2 Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Iran fought less as a conventional state than as the hub of a resistance network, drawing most actively on Hezbollah and partners in Yemen and Iraq. However, during the high-intensity phases, this proxy architecture proved less decisive than expected, with Tehran proving more isolated in direct combat than its network suggested. The conflict opened with a leadership decapitation strike that removed key figures, including the Supreme Leader, yet the rapid succession limited institutional disruption (Dorgan et al., 2026; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026). However, rather than collapsing, the intended paralysis instead hardened the regime and reduced prospects for early settlement.

4.3 Hierarchies versus Networks

The coalition fought as a hierarchy — fast, coherent, but dependent on apex integrity and long logistics tails through host states. On the other hand, Iran fought as a network — authority dispersed across the military, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and regional partners, slower but redundant, with no single node whose loss would collapse the system. Each form carried distinct advantages: the hierarchy concentrated force and delivered shock in the opening campaign, while the network traded tempo for survivability. The trade-off proved more valuable in a war of endurance.

4.4 Strategic Resilience and Adaptation

Iran’s dispersed structure proved able to adapt under fire in ways the

coalition's planners had discounted. Decapitation tested a system built to lose its head and continue fighting, with launch authority pre-delegated, succession arranged, and command speedily reconstituted. As fixed launchers were destroyed, Tehran shifted to mobile, concealed teams; as the air war closed off, it widened the contest into the economic and informational domains. Its decisive weapon was ultimately this capacity for adaptation rather than raw firepower, and it was what turned a losing military contest into an unresolved strategic one, carrying the analysis from the actors to the operations examined below.

5.0 The Campaign in Four Phases

The war unfolded in four phases, beginning with intense initial strikes and moving towards an unresolved standoff (Figure 2).

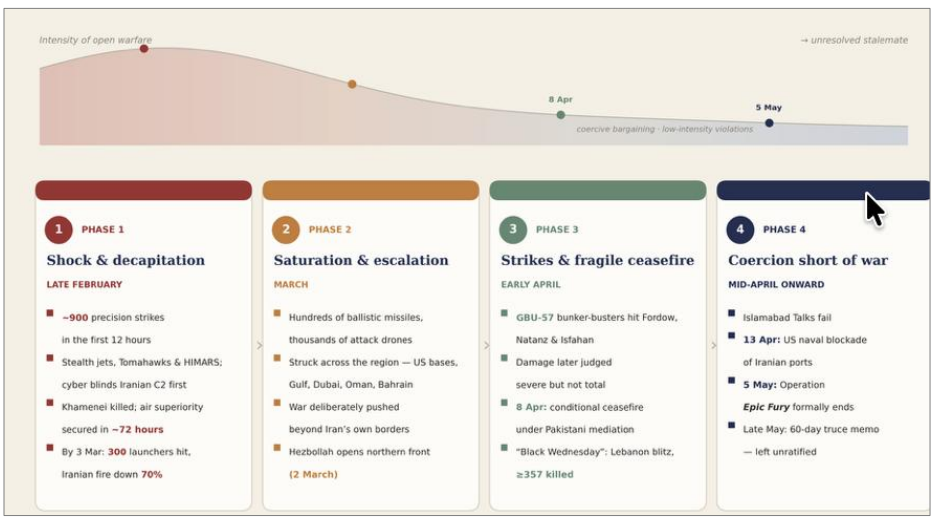


Figure 2. *The four-phase campaign moved from an early peak of violence into coercive bargaining and low-intensity violations between the 8 April ceasefire and the formal end of Epic Fury on 5 May; figures are reported wartime estimates. Source: Author's elaboration.*

5.1 Opening Decapitation and Counterforce Strikes

The operations began at an extraordinary tempo, with nearly 900 precision strikes in the first twelve hours. Stealth aircraft, sea-launched cruise missiles, and coordinated cyber disruption combined to blind Iranian command and kill Supreme Leader Khamenei. These opening blows facilitated the establishment of air superiority over western Iran within 72 hours; by 3 March, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) claimed to have destroyed 300 launchers and achieved a 70 per cent drop in Iranian fire (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026; Quwa, 2026). Iran's retaliation converted the decapitation strike into a horizontal regional war within days.

5.2 Economic and Maritime Expansion

As missile exchanges wore on, the centre of gravity shifted from the battlefield to the sea and the economy. Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz to designated hostile shipping, pressing chokepoint denial, while the coalition escalated against strategic facilities with US bunker-buster strikes on Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. With Iranian export revenue and Gulf shipping now decisive levers, Washington imposed a naval blockade of Iranian ports on 13 April, extending the contest into energy and trade systems (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

5.3 Exhaustion and Ceasefire

By April, all sides neared exhaustion. A conditional ceasefire was declared on 8 April under Pakistani mediation, though violations appeared within hours (Al Jazeera, 2025). *Epic Fury* formally concluded on 5 May, after which the conflict settled into coercive bargaining — blockade, escort operations, and stalled negotiation (House of Commons Library, 2026).

Casualty figures remained contested (Figure 3), with losses diverging sharply in form. By the ceasefire, deaths numbered in the thousands, concentrated in Iran and Lebanon: Iranian fatalities officially numbered around 3,468 but were estimated to be above 6,600; Lebanese deaths

numbered around 3,250; and displacement exceeded one million (House of Commons Library, 2026; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026). Material losses ran the other way. Iran lost up to two-thirds of its launchers and much of its production base, while the United States expended more than half of its premium interceptor stocks and, by April, some $25 billion. The asymmetry was clear: the weaker side absorbed heavier damage yet still denied a decisive conclusion, prompting a former Western intelligence officer to remark that "Iran played a weak hand well."

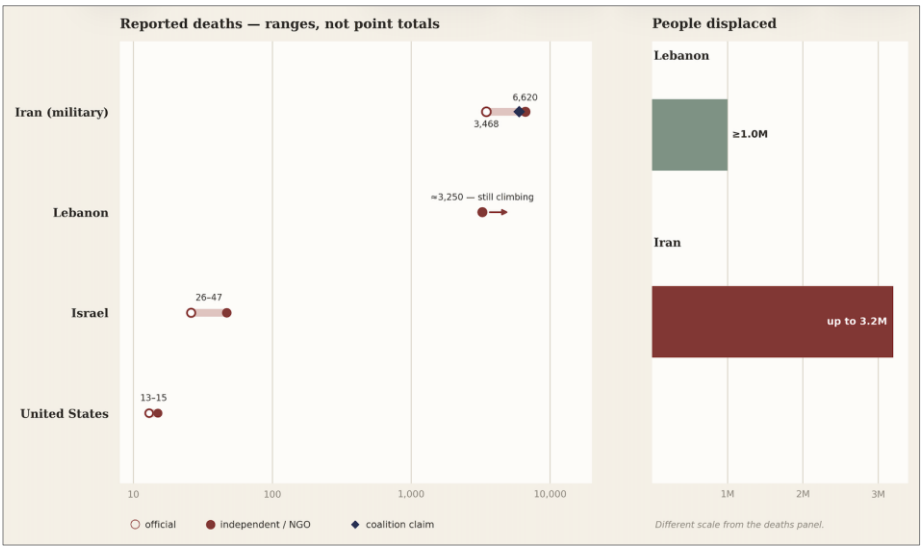


Figure 3. *Casualty and displacement figures are shown as ranges, from official tallies to higher independent estimates, with the widest ranges where observers had the least access. Source: Author's elaboration on House of Commons Library (2026) and Encyclopaedia Britannica (2026).*

6.0 Emerging Technologies and the Future of Warfare

Stripped to its mechanics, the war revealed two competing doctrines: precision versus saturation, exquisite quality versus affordable mass, and integrated systems versus dispersed swarms. Against this hypothesis, each side fought in the register where it held the edge, producing the clearest live test yet of how military advantage is shifting.

The outcome reinforced the central finding that technological superiority delivered battlefield dominance but not strategic decision (Table 2).

Table 2. *Comparative strategic doctrines and capabilities.*

Dimension	US–Israel	Iran
Air superiority	Very high (5th-gen stealth, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), refuelling)	Low (ageing fleet; relies on denial)
Strategic strike	Very high	Moderate
Missile / drone arsenal	High	High (dispersed, buried, survivable)
Naval reach	Very high (blue-water, carriers, subs)	Limited but geographically advantaged
Geographic depth	Low (Israel)	High
Ground forces (active)	Israel ~170,000 + reserves; US expeditionary	~610,000 + large paramilitary base
Economic endurance	High	Lower under sanctions

Source: Author's construct

6.1 Air Dominance and Precision Strike

Coalition air dominance shaped the war from the first hour, as in 1967, 1991, 1999, and 2011, when control of the skies enabled strategic freedom of action. However, dominance was never immunity: Iranian missiles and drones continued to penetrate defences, underscoring the limits of layered systems (Pape, 1996). American air power functioned

as a coordinated architecture — carrier fighters flew the bulk of sorties, stealth aircraft opened defended airspace, drones provided persistent watch, and heavy bombers reached strategic depth (Table 3). Iran lacked a comparable system; its ageing fleet was driven from contested airspace within days, forcing reliance on mass-produced loitering munitions and missiles (Table 4). High strike volumes — over 15,000 targets by the second week — demonstrated operational reach, but tempo was constrained more by maintenance and targeting requirements than by enemy resistance. Control of the air enabled broad freedom of action, yet the political decision remained out of reach.

Table 3. *Snapshot of US air power.*

Aircraft	Type	Role in war
F/A-18E/F Super Hornet	Carrier strike fighter	Primary strike sorties
EA-18G Growler	Electronic warfare	Radar jamming, SEAD (suppression of enemy air defences)
F-35C Lightning II	Stealth fighter	Deep strike, reconnaissance
MQ-9 Reaper	Armed drone	Surveillance, precision strikes
B-52 / B-1B	Heavy bombers	Long-range strategic strikes

Source: Author's construct

Table 4. *Snapshot of comparative Iranian air power.*

Category	Iranian assets	Strengths	Weaknesses
Fighters	F-4, Su-22, MiG-29, Kowsar, Saeqeh	Numbers, familiarity	Outdated, poor survivability
Drones	Shahed-136/129/171	Cheap, swarm tactics, range	Easily jammed, limited precision
Air defence	Russian SAMs, domestic copies	Dense coverage	Rapidly degraded by SEAD

Source: Author's construct

Cancian and Park (2026) record more than a thousand US strikes in the first 24 hours, with Israel adding over 750. By the second week, coalition forces had struck more than 15,000 targets. Tempo then settled at 300–500 daily strikes, limited less by enemy resistance than by maintenance, crew rest, and target validation. Yet none of this produced a political decision, and residual Iranian launch capacity continued to hit coalition energy facilities.

6.2 Missile Warfare and Cost-Exchange Ratios

Never able to match Western air power, Iran built its doctrine around saturation, devolving on buried "missile cities" and mobile launch teams designed to survive opening waves. Cheap drones and rockets forced the coalition to expend costly interceptors, creating an economic imbalance that turned every exchange into a contest of endurance. Much of the struggle shifted towards perception and narrative, where the weaker side sought to recast resilience as legitimacy (European Policy Centre, 2026; The Globe and Mail, 2026).



Plate 2. *Iran's low-cost one-way "kamikaze" Shahed-136 loitering munition, deployed in massed swarms to force the launch of far more expensive interceptors. Source: open-source imagery (NBC News).*

Cancian and Park (2026) estimate that by day four, Iran had launched more than 2,000 drones and 500 ballistic missiles, with salvos peaking at 700 daily (Figure 4). Volume declined as inventories thinned, but residual capacity endured. The arithmetic was the strategy, as drones costing tens of thousands forced interceptors priced in millions. Pentagon assessments noted heavy drawdown of premium stocks, raising the risk of depletion ("Winchester") and opportunity costs relative to readiness for an Indo-Pacific contingency (Carnahan, 2026; "Magazine Depth," 2026).

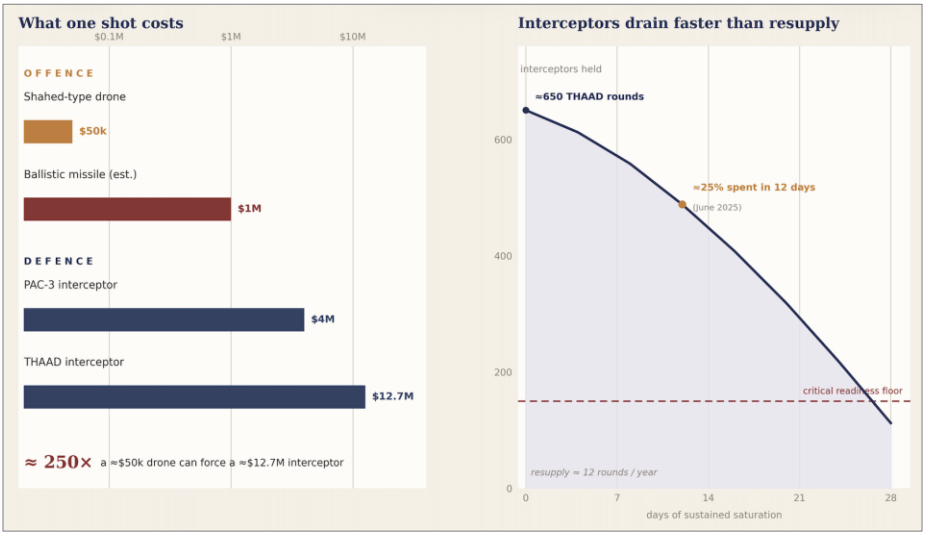


Figure 4. *Cheap offence versus costly defence—an asymmetry near 250:1—overlaid with the dwindling interceptor magazine. Source: Author's elaboration on CSIS Missile Defence Project data.*

Iran combined saturation with blinding strikes on radars and communication nodes, aiming less to defeat every defence than to exhaust them. Missile warfare in 2026 was thus a contest of industrial capacity, stockpile depth, and economic endurance as much as accuracy.

6.3 Intelligence Dominance and Targeting Networks

Coalition precision relied on integrated intelligence networks that rendered much of Iran's infrastructure transparent. The decisive target was the kill chain rather than the platform, as strikes on radar and communications nodes degraded defensive architectures and exposed vulnerabilities in interconnected systems. Reported attacks on Gulf missile defence followed an outside-in logic — early-warning radar, then fire control, then launchers — extending the suppression of air defences doctrine to missile defence. Batteries were disabled by

severing radar links at lower cost, showing how system-level disruption could achieve dominance (Figure 5).

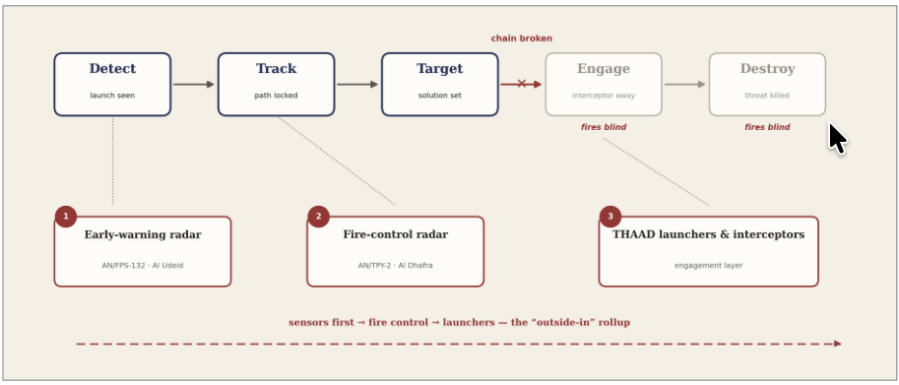


Figure 5. *The kill chain and the outside-in rollup. Iran attacked the sensor-to-shooter system rather than its platforms; severing one link disables the whole chain. Source: Author's elaboration.*

6.4 AI, Automation and Human–Machine Warfare

Several interlocking innovations gave the fighting its technical signature, relying on AI-enabled targeting and compressing the "find–fix–finish" cycle from hours to minutes, while sensor-to-shooter networks closed the loop with minimal human relay. Much of the war was also fought by autonomous systems involving loitering munitions, drone swarms, and automated air defences. Drone saturation industrialised mass, pairing thousands of cheap craft with a few advanced technology missiles. Ultimately, combat power lay in human–machine teams, and the side integrating sensing, deciding, and striking fastest held the initiative even without holding ground. Thus, the operational advantage derives from faster integration of sensing, decision, and strike functions rather than from full autonomy.

6.5 Cyber Operations and Digital Battlespaces

The quietest front, and among the most decisive, ran through cyberspace. Early intrusions blinded Iranian command and severed sensor-shooter links, while internet blackouts disrupted mobilisation

and shaped public narratives. Iran's offensive cyber operations achieved less, constrained by attribution risks and hardened defences.

The stark lesson is that modern war depends on software-mediated systems, involving kill chains, air defences, energy grids, financial channels, but adversaries able to corrupt them can blunt platforms they cannot destroy. Cyber operations disrupted command networks and information systems, reinforcing the dependence of contemporary warfare on digital infrastructure.

6.6 The Nuclear Dimension

The war unfolded under a nuclear shadow. Conventional precision, cyber penetration, and intelligence dominance enabled strikes on Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan without recourse to nuclear weapons (Congressional Research Service, 2025). These attacks relied on the GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator, delivered by B-2 bombers at extended range with multiple refuelling cycles. Operational limits mattered: inventories numbered only a few dozen, forcing planners to prioritise a handful of deeply buried sites rather than attempt a wider campaign.

That conventional tools could attempt a disarming strike on a nuclear programme is one of the war's most consequential technical facts. It demonstrated that nuclear infrastructure is not immune to conventional reach, raising questions about deterrence credibility and the future of proliferation. The strikes underscored a paradox: nuclear capability may deter, but hardened facilities can still be targeted by advanced conventional systems, shifting the balance between assurance and vulnerability. Yet what technology could not supply was staying power, and it is to endurance that the analysis now turns.

7.0 National Resilience, Critical Infrastructure, and Economic Coercion

7.1 The Strait of Hormuz as Strategic Infrastructure

For Iran, the global economy was the battlefield, and the Strait of Hormuz its most potent weapon. Closing it to hostile shipping removed nearly a fifth of the world's seaborne oil and a comparable share of LNG, triggering reroutes and a price shock the UN linked to historic levels of hunger (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023; International Energy Agency, 2024). Against US blue-water power, Tehran mounted a classic anti-access campaign using fast-attack swarms, smart mines, and anti-ship missiles that, for a time, succeeded in denying passage. Coalition responses were overwhelming, with nine Iranian warships reported destroyed by 1 March, yet sea denial persisted. Iran even levied transit tolls on the grip it retained. Long-range precision fires eroded the assumption that capital ships could operate with impunity, and the Strait became the most consequential live test of that proposition. Karachi's port authority reported tankers idling offshore for weeks, while Gulf insurers hiked premiums overnight — small disruptions that made the strategic contest visible in daily life.



Plate 3. *USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) transits the Arabian Sea in support of the US blockade of Iran. Source: US Central Command.*

7.2 Energy Warfare and Economic Coercion

The blockade squeezed Iran, but the pain ran both ways. Tehran could inflict comparable damage on energy-importing economies and, through them, on the domestic politics of its adversaries. Pump prices became a major issue in election season, and the weapon cut at the global economy rather than at armies — reroutes, insurance spikes, and supply chain disruption stretched from Asian refiners to European industry. Markets adapted quickly: reserves were drawn down, alternative routings established, and the initial price spike eased even as risk persisted. In Europe, truckers staged strikes over diesel costs, while in Asia, refiners scrambled to secure spot cargoes from West Africa — episodes that showed how economic coercion decays unless continually renewed, its power measured in households and factories as much as in strategy papers.

7.3 The Dual Blockade

Washington replied on 13 April with a naval blockade designed to choke Iranian export revenue even as Tehran maintained its grip on transit — a "dual blockade" in which each side held a chokehold, but neither could compel the other. Logistics became a front in its own right. Thousands of Iran-bound containers stranded in Karachi prompted Islamabad to formalise an overland bypass in late April, reviving dormant transit agreements and older smuggling routes through Turkey, the Caspian, and rail freight to China. These corridors eased import strangulation but could not replace tanker volumes, restoring logistics and signalling resilience more than revenue. Pakistani customs officers described convoys of trucks moving under armed escort through Baluchistan, a reminder that resilience was improvised at ground level. The blockade was not only a contest of ships and missiles, but of truck drivers, port clerks, and smugglers keeping lifelines open.

7.4 Critical Infrastructure as a Battlespace

By spring, the war's centre of gravity had shifted from armies to the systems that sustained them. Refineries, export terminals, power grids, and communications hubs became the real front lines. When the THAAD radar in Jordan, one of only nine worldwide, was destroyed, it was not just a military loss but a shock to civilians who saw their networks falter. Each strike hit a high-value node straddling military and civilian life, eroding both warfighting capacity and public morale. Jordanian technicians worked by flashlight to restore grid connections, while families queued for hours at petrol stations—everyday disruptions that revealed how modern economies concentrate function into a few efficient but fragile points. Adversaries able to reach them need not defeat armies to paralyse states.

7.5 National Resilience under Strategic Pressure

The war's most telling feature was what did not occur: no overland invasion of Iran's heartland. The only sustained ground fighting was Israel's inconclusive Lebanese incursion. When an American F-15E went down in the Zagros, the recovery effort drew more than 150 aircraft, several lost or destroyed to prevent capture — a reminder of how costly even limited ground contact could be (The War Zone, 2026; Marrow & Roque, 2026; Air & Space Forces Magazine, 2026).



Plate 4. *Wreckage from the combat search-and-rescue effort to recover the downed F-15E crew; aircraft were destroyed to prevent their capture. Source: Iranian media, via The War Zone.*

Beneath these episodes lies a principle relevant to any state facing a technologically superior adversary: resilience engineered to offset conventional inferiority. Iran endured because survivability was built into its structure — launch authority dispersed and pre-delegated, missile forces scattered across hardened sites, command redundancy arranged in advance, and energy and logistics networks degraded but never severed. The corollary for critical infrastructure protection is direct: defence depends less on perimeter security than on dispersal, redundancy, hardening, and industrial depth to replace losses faster than an enemy can inflict them. In 2026, the centre of gravity lay less in orders of battle than in the endurance of societies and systems behind them (Bourbeau, 2018). Railway crews rerouted freight through secondary lines — ordinary improvisations that made clear how strategic competition is shifting from forces to resilience.

8.0 Geopolitics and Strategic Competition

8.1 The War as a Theatre of Great-Power Competition

At the highest level, the war was more than a regional clash; it became a stage for great-power rivalry. Iran absorbed punishment, but its endurance was underwritten by partners who supplied depth, diplomatic cover, and economic alternatives. The conflict doubled as a live stress test of the American defence industrial base and of US global power projection, watched closely by those most invested in the outcome. In Washington, congressional hearings debated whether interceptor spending in the Gulf was mortgaging readiness in the Pacific, while in Beijing, analysts tracked every drawdown as a rehearsal for Taiwan— parallel conversations that showed how a regional war was read globally — the pre-war "danger zone" dynamic playing out in real time (Brands & Beckley, 2022).

8.2 China, Russia and Strategic Depth

China and Russia fought no part of the war, yet shaped much of it. Russia provided air defences, a Caspian shipping route, and a standing veto; China offered markets for sanctioned crude, financial systems beyond the dollar's reach, and rare-earth processing critical to advanced munitions. Their backing turned Iranian endurance into a strategy, underwritten by powers intent on draining American magazines far from the Pacific. The sharpest expression was monetary: among Iran's reported terms for reopening the Strait was a demand that oil transit be paid in yuan rather than dollars — an attempt to probe the dollar's reserve-currency status with Beijing as an implicit backstop — geoeconomic statecraft of precisely the kind pre-war analysis had mapped (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Russian crews were photographed unloading Iranian cargo at Astrakhan, while Chinese refiners quietly signed long-term contracts in yuan — small transactions that carried strategic weight, showing that endurance was not only military but monetary.

8.3 Pakistan and the Mediation Dimension

Pakistan's emergence as an indispensable broker was itself a geopolitical statement. A Sunni-majority nuclear power with ties to Gulf monarchies, a sensitive border with Iran, and working relationships in both Washington and Beijing, Islamabad was uniquely placed to carry messages between parties unwilling to speak directly. Lacking a US–Iran channel, mediators relayed offers as rigid text blocks — preserving deniability but stripping bargaining of flexibility. Pakistani officials described late-night sessions in Islamabad hotels, drafting these texts to shuttle between capitals. The diplomacy exposed the limits of traditional Western and Gulf mediators and illustrated how a rising middle power could convert geography and relationships into diplomatic capital, a model other middle powers will have noted (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

8.4 The Defence-Industrial Stress Test

Beneath the strategic rivalry lay an industrial one that the war exposed with uncomfortable clarity. Every premium interceptor sent over Qatar or Tel Aviv was one absent from the Western Pacific. The United States cannot rebuild advanced interceptors at the rate a peer war would consume them, nor source components outside a rare-earth supply chain dominated by China. Defence contractors in Arizona reported months-long delays in obtaining critical alloys, while Pentagon planners warned that Patriot reloads lagged behind consumption. These bottlenecks revealed how a regional contest had become a window onto the central question of the era: whether the American arsenal had the depth to sustain a long war against a peer (Brands & Beckley, 2022).

8.5 From the Gulf to the Indo-Pacific

The Gulf was ultimately a window onto the Pacific, and signalling ran both ways. The rate at which the United States drew down stocks against a regional adversary was read in Beijing as a measure of how a longer war over Taiwan might unfold. China observed American resolve and sustainment, while Washington relearned that a single regional war

could mortgage readiness for its most feared contingency. The war recalibrated proliferation incentives by demonstrating that conventional precision could credibly enable disarming counterforce strikes, thereby rendering preventive action against nuclear-latent states more conceivable. Yet the lesson for watching states — set beside Libya, which surrendered its programme, and North Korea, which did not — is that latency without a survivable arsenal invites the very strike Iran suffered, pushing future proliferators towards concealment, dispersal, and early weaponisation. In Tokyo, defence officials openly worried that the Gulf War was draining the very magazines they would rely on in a Taiwan crisis, a constant reminder that regional contests reverberate globally. The same interdependence ran through the war's informational front, to which the analysis turns next.

9.0 Information Sovereignty and the Sixth Domain

9.1 The Information Battlespace

The war generated a surge of claim-driven content — verifiable and fabricated video clips, communiqués, and commentary — systematically amplified across social platforms and disseminated by non-Western state media. Ignoring this torrent risks obscuring a defining feature of the conflict, while uncritical acceptance undermines analytical integrity. The struggle to define events became part of the war itself, extending Iran's escalation into cognitive space. A common tactic was the "claim and silence" move: unverifiable assertions circulated, official non-confirmation was presented as proof, and the burden of disproof shifted to the adversary (Table 5). Iranian youth recorded missile launches on mobile devices before blackouts, while coalition commanders confronted social media feeds alleging the destruction of bases — illustrating how the information contest permeated daily life and blurred into the conduct of war.

Table 5. *Selected contested episodes of the information war, with credibility tier and the real concern each dramatises.*

Episode (claim)	Tier	The genuine concern beneath it
F-5 strike on Camp Buehring	Mixed	Layered Gulf defences are optimised against threats arriving from above; a low-altitude penetrator under a saturation wave exploits the architecture's worst case.
Counter-radar "outside-in" rollup	Mixed	The cost-exchange and magazine-depth problem is real; a defence can be out-spent and out-lasted rather than out-flown, linking the Gulf to the Pacific.
Strike on a US destroyer in open water	Low	Coordinated ballistic-plus-sea-skimming saturation against layered naval defences is a live, unresolved survivability debate in serious navies.
"Fifty bases vapourised" in one night	Very Low	Intelligence preparation of a hardened facility and interceptor-exhausting saturation are real doctrines, inflated here past physical possibility.
The "Master Trap" (great-power orchestration)	Very Low	Rare-earth processing concentration and cross-theatre munitions strain are genuine vulnerabilities, weaponised into determinist propaganda.
Manufactured-pretext / casus belli	Mixed	Politicised intelligence and confirmation bias are documented features of 2003 and bear on the 2026 imminence claim.

Source: Author's construct

9.2 Strategic Narratives and Legitimacy

Naming a domain is not the same as theorising it. Strategic narrative theory supplies the first lens: belligerents compete not only to win engagements but to impose a persuasive account of what the war is about

and how it will end. The competing framings traced in Section 3.3 — counter-proliferation against resistance to imperial aggression — were therefore weapons of the cognitive domain, shaping coalition cohesion, domestic will, and third-party alignment. Their effects were visible at street level: murals of resistance appeared overnight on Tehran's walls, while Washington's press briefings laboured to explain the war's lawfulness — everyday images of how the legitimacy deficit established in Section 3 hardened into an operational handicap. In the cognitive domain, that asymmetry was itself a front line.

9.3 Cognitive Warfare

Cognitive warfare offers a second lens, aimed at the cognition of populations and decision-makers at machine speed (du Cluzel, 2021). The 2026 war broke new ground as an AI-native battlespace in which synthetic media and attribution collapse did more than circulate falsehoods: they attacked the shared capacity to establish truth at all, corroding the epistemic commons on which every actor depends to decide and act. The target was no longer only what audiences believed, but whether they could believe anything with confidence. Deepfake orders circulated among coalition units, forcing commanders to double-check every signal, while families at home saw contradictory footage of the same strike, unsure which version to trust — everyday fragments that showed how the epistemic commons itself had become contested terrain.

9.4 AI, Deepfakes and the Liar's Dividend

The most destabilising weapon was synthetic forgery and the doubt it bred (Goldstein et al., 2023). Where any image, intercept, or order could be fabricated — or dismissed as fabricated — the "liar's dividend" allowed actors to disown real signals and manufacture false ones at will (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Deepfake briefings, forged battle-damage imagery, and bot-amplified rumours all featured in 2026. Their cumulative effect was to erode public confidence that anything seen or

heard could be trusted, which did more damage than any single believed falsehood. A forged video of a coalition general announcing a retreat spread across Telegram channels, only to be denied hours later (TechPolicy.Press, 2026; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2026). Cognitive resilience — publics and command structures able to withhold judgment, cross-check sources, and resist manipulation — became as vital a defensive capability as any interceptor.

9.5 Deterrence in Perception Space

This erosion reached deterrence itself. Classical deterrence rests on the credible communication of capability and resolve, yet when signals can be faked or denied, credibility dissolves, misperception grows, and inadvertent escalation becomes more likely. Victory became a belief about who prevailed, fought as much in the fields as in the feeds. In global capitals, diplomats debated whether Iran had truly struck a US destroyer or whether the footage was staged — an inability to verify events that placed sovereignty itself at stake. A state unable to attribute attacks or contest hostile narratives forfeits control over the meaning of its wars and, increasingly, its politics. Information sovereignty — the capacity to establish and defend a shared evidentiary baseline — thus joins territorial and economic sovereignty as a condition of strategic independence. Building it, through verification infrastructure, attribution capability, and resilient public communication, is now as much a defence investment as any missile or radar.

10.0 War Termination and Strategic Stalemate

10.1 The Armed Pause

The ceasefire of 8 April 2026 was less an ending than a pause. It was exhaustion, not agreement, which halted the fighting — a “managed inconclusion” born of mutual depletion Agence France-Presse, 2026). By early April, all three principals had crossed the line at which the cost of fighting outweighed the gain: the United States neared exhaustion of

its high-end interceptor stocks and pressed to reopen shipping lanes; Iran reeled from bunker-buster strikes and the dislocation of leadership losses; Israel absorbed daily salvos from the north and needed to rearm.

10.2 Mediation and Negotiation

Mediation fell to Pakistan, whose shuttle diplomacy produced the conditional framework announced on 8 April and culminated in a 60-day memorandum of understanding in late May to extend the ceasefire and initiate nuclear negotiations. With no direct channel between Washington and Tehran, offers passed through intermediaries as rigid text blocks — preserving deniability but stripping away flexibility. Washington negotiated chiefly to halt bombardment and reopen shipping; Tehran sought relief from regime threats and the blockade; Israel was bound by neither aim. Mediation managed escalation but could not resolve a conflict where trust had collapsed, authoritative interlocutors were absent, and no mediator held the leverage to guarantee terms.



Plate 5. *Shuttle mediation at one remove: US and Iranian delegations meet the Pakistani prime minister in Islamabad, April 2026. Lacking direct US–Iran channels, mediators carried offers as rigid blocks of text. Source: Reuters / Le Monde / Economic Times.*

10.3 Why the Ceasefire Failed

The ceasefire unravelled due to the asymmetry of aims. Washington bargained to halt bombardment and reopen shipping; Israel saw survival at stake and refused to decouple Iran's mainland facilities from rocket fire in Lebanon. Within hours of the declaration, Israeli strikes killed hundreds across Lebanon. Read in that light, the Israel Defence Forces' "Black Wednesday" attacks were less a result of confusion than a deliberate strategic decoupling. Three incompatible readings pulled the framework apart: Washington and Islamabad designed it to pacify the whole theatre, Jerusalem insisted Lebanon was a separate theatre, and Tehran held that any strike on the Axis of Resistance violated the core accord.

10.4 Ripeness and the Absence of Settlement

Wars end when expectations converge closely enough to define a settlement that each side prefers to fighting. In 2026, that convergence never came. The dual blockade created a stalemate, but little way out. Three obstacles blocked settlement: contested damage assessments clouded by synthetic media left each side with its own estimate of relative power; unresolved proxies and thin verification made commitments unenforceable; and the decapitation of Iranian leadership removed interlocutors who might have negotiated. Coalition analysts debated assessments they could not verify, while Iranian commanders insisted their arsenals remained intact — evidence that neither side believed it had been beaten. Exhaustion was real, but without trust, verification, or authoritative voices, diplomacy could not convert battlefield leverage into peace.

10.5 Possible End States

From here, several futures were plausible. The likeliest was a frozen stalemate, the armed pause hardening into a Korean-style armistice without peace. Renewed escalation, such as the Iran-Israel and Iran-US strikes in early June 2026, could follow a flashpoint in the Strait or the

collapse of the unratified truce, risks sharpened by the rearmament during the pause. A negotiated settlement linking the Strait, nuclear question, sanctions relief, and regional security would be the only genuine resolution, yet it presupposes ripeness, credible interlocutors, and an external guarantor — none of which is in place. The most destabilising prospect could be an Iranian dash to a deliverable weapon, a path the war's own logic perversely encouraged. In diplomatic terms, the very conditions producing stalemate were now obstructing resolution, and only a shock large enough to manufacture ripeness could break the deadlock.

11. Conclusion: Supremacy Without Decision

Future historians will ask the question posed after every precision-age campaign since the Second World War: did air power and precision strike achieve decisive outcomes, or merely impose costs without resolving the political conflict? On present evidence, the answer leans towards the latter. The coalition won the air and strike campaign comprehensively, met most of its kinetic objectives, and still could not convert dominance into a settlement, even as a militarily weaker actor exacted disproportionate costs despite losing every measurable exchange (Clausewitz, 1976).

In 1991 and 1999, precision was scarce and one-sided, information flowed through broadcast gatekeepers, and the defeated party stood alone; in 2026, precision was abundant on both sides, every strike was contested in real time on global platforms, and great-power patrons provided the weaker belligerent with depth no adversary of the 1990s possessed. The campaign that compelled Belgrade in seventy-eight days had no equivalent purchase on a patron-backed Iran after a hundred.

Five propositions distil the argument:

1. **The paradox itself**. Military dominance no longer guarantees political decision; command of the battlefield did not deliver command of the peace.
2. **Resilience as offset**. Iran's survival shows that dispersal, redundancy, and pre-delegation can offset conventional inferiority. A weaker state needs only to deny its opponent victory rather than secure one of its own.
3. **Infrastructure as battlespace**. Energy, logistics, magazines, and supply chains became primary targets, making sustainment a strategic variable in its own right.
4. **Cognitive warfare as a domain**. AI-native narrative competition shaped legitimacy and perceived outcomes as decisively as fires shaped front lines.
5. **Regional wars as global contests**. Great powers supplied depth, cover, and economic alternatives that allowed clients to absorb punishment — conditions that, a generation ago, would have ended the fight.

These realities underline the paradox that supremacy can destroy, punish, and coerce, but not necessarily decide. What new technology changed were the means and domains of war; what it left untouched was the primacy of the political object, exactly as in 2003.

The implications of that finding extend well beyond the belligerents to African states and other middle powers. First, capability now turns on magazine depth, sustainment, and indigenous industrial bases more than on platform counts, rewarding investment in affordable mass, dispersal, and resilient command over a handful of exquisite systems that cannot be replaced. Second, sovereign capacity in the cognitive domain — verification, attribution, narrative — has become a condition of strategic independence, since a state without it risks having its wars and politics

defined externally. Third, the actors most damaged were regional hosts caught between protector and neighbour, drawn into a war they had not chosen. That is the strongest argument the conflict offers for genuine strategic autonomy and non-alignment.

For African planners, the issue is practical rather than theoretical: given that most states can afford force structures closer to Iran's dispersed model than to the coalition's, network redundancy, pre-delegated command, and affordable mass— especially layered unmanned systems — offer them more credible deterrence than small fleets of exquisite platforms. Continental institutions carry a parallel lesson: neither the African Union nor the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) yet commands the verification and attribution capacity that information sovereignty demands, leaving African publics exposed to the synthetic-media coercion this war showcased. Building that capacity is the institutional counterpart to nonalignment, preserving the ability to judge — and to choose — independently.

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