



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 10, Issue 23, April 2026

ISSUED BY



Received

March 10, 2026

Accepted

April 12, 2026

Published

June 17, 2026

THE PARADOX OF 'PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH' IN OPERATION EPIC FURY

Naveed Ahmad

The author is a security policy fellow at the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah). He specializes in hybrid threats and the impact of advanced as well as disruptive technologies on geo-strategy and warfare.

Abstract

This paper examines the 2026 US/Israel-Iran conflict as a critical test of the Trump administration's national security architecture, analyzing the friction between the National Security Strategy's vision of "unprecedented peace" and the National Defense Strategy's "peace through strength" doctrine. The study examines whether the shift toward transactional realism, defined by the Department of War ethos and rigorous allied burden-sharing, effectively mitigated risks of regional entanglement. It also assesses if reliance on Israeli de-capitation strikes against Iran inadvertently precipitated asymmetric retaliation, hence destabilizing the Gulf region.

Keywords: US-Israel-Iran conflict, transactional realism, game theory, balance of threat, escalation ladder, proxy warfare, asymmetric retaliation, "America First," "peace through strength," National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS).

Introduction

The 2026 US/Israel-Iran conflict represents a critically important case study for examining the architecture of US national security under President Donald Trump's 2025–2026 administration, revealing the tension between the National Security Strategy's (NSS 2025) vision of "unprecedented peace" through the empowerment of Israel, and the operational reality of the National Defense Strategy's (NDS 2026) doctrine of "peace through strength." This paper explores whether the administration's shift toward transactional realism — characterized by the Department of War's drive to impose a "peace through strength" agenda and burden-sharing with allies — succeeded in mitigating the risks of long-term regional entanglement, or whether reliance on Israeli decapitation strikes inadvertently triggered a chain of asymmetric retaliation that threatened Gulf stability and challenged the economic imperatives of the "America First" doctrine.

By interrogating the disconnect between the strategic assumption that military dominance could substitute for political stabilization and the observed volatility of the post-strike environment, this analysis applies a four-lens theoretical framework to deconstruct the failure. It utilizes game theory to reveal how the United States misread the conflict as a contest of dominance rather than a "game of chicken" and a "prisoner's dilemma" that drove rational actors toward mutual destruction. It employs Stephen Walt's balance of threat to explain the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) restraint, driven not by Iran's power but by the heightened perception of US aggressive intent. It draws on Alexander Wendt's constructivism to uncover how "warrior" identity norms and the "never leave behind" imperative locked the United States into an inescapable escalation spiral, preventing diplomatic off-ramps. Finally, it applies escalation ladder theory to demonstrate how the United States misjudged the "slippery slope" of climbing to Rung 30 (decapitation) without a viable exit strategy, turning a controlled strike into a regional conflagration.

Ultimately, this study seeks to understand whether the 2025/2026 documents represent a viable path toward sovereign stability or a high-risk gamble where the pursuit of "peace through strength" via proxy warfare and identity-driven commitment inadvertently exacerbates the very regional chaos it aims to contain, transforming a vision of strategic dominance into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability.

Contours and Paradoxes of the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025

The NSS rejects post-Cold War "global domination" and "nation-building" framing these as failures that hollowed out the United States' industrial base and subsidized allies. It proposes a "necessary, welcome correction" focused on sovereignty, economic strength and military lethality.

"After the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best

interests of our country... They overestimated America's ability to fund . . . a massive military . . . alongside a massive welfare-regulatory-administrative state."⁽¹⁾

The NSS rests on four pillars:

- *"Peace through strength."* The United States must field the world's most powerful military to deter aggression, rejecting "idealism" for "hardnosed realism."

"President Trump's foreign policy is... pragmatic without being 'pragmatist,' realistic without being 'realist,' principled without being 'idealistic,' muscular without being 'hawkish,' and restrained without being 'dovish.' It is motivated above all by what works for America — or, in two words, 'America First.'⁽²⁾ "Peace Through Strength – Strength is the best deterrent."⁽³⁾

- *Economic security & reindustrialization:* The strategy demands a return to manufacturing, energy dominance and the rejection of environmental regulations.

"We want the world's most robust industrial base... American national power depends on a strong industrial sector capable of meeting both peacetime and wartime production demands."⁽⁴⁾ "We reject the disastrous 'climate change' and 'Net Zero' ideologies that have so greatly harmed Europe, threaten the United States, and subsidize our adversaries."⁽⁵⁾

- *Burden-sharing and fairness:* Allies must pay for their own defense (targeting 5% of GDP for NATO) and trade must be reciprocal. The NSS indicates that the United States will no longer tolerate "free-riding."

"We expect our allies to spend far more of their national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on their own defense... We will no longer tolerate... free-riding, trade imbalances, predatory economic practices."⁽⁶⁾

- *Sovereignty and border security:* The United States asserts full control over its borders and rejects transnational institutions that erode sovereignty. "The era of mass migration is over... Border security is the primary element of national security."⁽⁷⁾

Regional Priorities

- *The Middle East:* The NSS declared the region no longer the top priority due to US energy independence after the Shale Revolution. Iran is claimed to have been "greatly weakened" by Operation Midnight Hammer.

"The days in which the Middle East dominated American foreign policy... are thankfully over... Iran... has been greatly weakened by... Operation Midnight Hammer."⁽⁸⁾

- *Indo-Pacific:* It is reiterated as the primary theater for great power competition with China.

- "The Indo-Pacific is already the source of almost half the world's GDP... To thrive at home, we must successfully compete there."⁽⁹⁾

- *Western Hemisphere:* A "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine to exclude foreign rivals (China/Russia) and control migration. The extraction

operation of President Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela is a manifestation of the (Donroe) doctrine.⁽¹⁰⁾

“The United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine... This ‘Trump Corollary’... is a common-sense and potent restoration of American power.”⁽¹¹⁾

Unprecedented Peace

The NSS (2025) asserts that Trump has achieved “unprecedented peace” in eight conflicts, including a deal with Iran, through “presidential diplomacy.”

“President Trump has cemented his legacy as The President of Peace... [he] secured unprecedented peace in eight conflicts... including... Israel and Iran.”⁽¹²⁾

Overall, the NSS presents a transactional worldview: The United States will protect its interests with overwhelming strength, demand allies pay their share and use diplomacy to secure “peace” through decisive force (like Operation Midnight Hammer). However, this reliance on decapitation strikes to create peace set the stage for the strategic miscalculations and escalation spirals that define the 2026 conflict.

The NSS is a document of transactional realism. It views the world not as a community of nations to be uplifted but as a marketplace of sovereign states where the United States must prioritize its own interests above all. The NSS:

- Identifies the need for industrial renewal and the dangers of over-extension.
- Assumes that “strength” and “diplomacy” can easily resolve deep-seated ideological conflicts (like the conflict between Iran and Israel) and that allies will simply comply with new financial demands (5% GDP).
- While the NSS claims to have secured “peace” with Iran via Operation Midnight Hammer, the document’s reliance on “decapitation” and “obliteration” as tools of peace sets the stage for the very “uncontrolled chaos” that would follow in 2026, contradicting its own goal of “avoiding forever wars.”

The NSS provides the ideological blueprint for the National Defense Strategy (NDS), the objective of which is to operationalize the grand strategy.

Ambitions and Drawbacks of the NDS

The NDS of 2026 operationalizes the “America First” doctrine into a hierarchical defense posture, explicitly rejecting the post-Cold War era of “global policing” and “nation-building,” replacing it with a triage strategy: prioritize the homeland and the Indo-Pacific, while forcing allies to assume primary responsibility for Europe, the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. The key features of the NDS include:

The Department of War and the Warrior Ethos

The document renames the Department of Defense (DoD) to the Department of War (DoW). This signals a philosophical shift from “defense” (passive protection)

to "warfighting" (active, decisive destruction).

"Rather than protect and advance Americans' interests, they opened our borders... They condemned our warfighters, criticizing and neglecting the warrior ethos that was once cultivated... The Department of War will restore American military dominance."⁽¹³⁾

Sounding more like a movie script, the document reads, "We will be our nation's sword and its shield, always ready to be wielded decisively at the President's direction... Out with utopian idealism; in with hardnosed realism."⁽¹⁴⁾

The Four Lines of Effort (LOEs)

To achieve the first LOE i.e., "Defend the Homeland," the strategy puts forward the "Golden Dome," as a dedicated shield to counter "large missile barrages."

"We will defend our nation's skies through Golden Dome for America and a renewed focus on countering unmanned aerial threats."⁽¹⁵⁾

Extending US defense to "Hemisphere Enforcement," i.e., the "Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine" is a framework that asserts US preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, specifically aiming to exclude peer adversaries such as China and Russia through regional security, control of strategic assets and curbing migration and drug cartels.

"This is the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and America's military stands ready to enforce it with speed, power, and precision, as the world saw in Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE."⁽¹⁶⁾

The second LOE declares to deter China with "strength, not confrontation." "Deterrence by Denial" is applied along the First Island Chain. "Our goal is simple: To prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies... We will erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain (FIC)."⁽¹⁷⁾

"We will be strong but not unnecessarily confrontational. This is how we will help to turn President Trump's vision for peace through strength into reality."⁽¹⁸⁾

The third LOE is about burden-sharing. "President Trump has set a new global standard for defense spending at NATO's Hague Summit: 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on core military spending and an additional 1.5% on security-related spending, for a total of 5% of GDP."⁽¹⁹⁾

The fourth and last LOE points to supercharging the US defense industrial base (DIB), a "once-in-a-century revival." "Making the DIB great again requires clear vision, strong relationships, and a solid commitment to rebuild the ultimate foundation of our military strength... a national mobilization — a call to industrial arms on par with similar revivals of the last century."⁽²⁰⁾

The NDS creates the risk of multitheater war as well as multiple wars, i.e., with China, Russia and Iran. "It is only prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters."⁽²¹⁾

The strategy provides the adoption of the Hague Summit Declaration as the cornerstone of preparation to deal with a multitheater war scenario. "If our allies and partners invest properly in their defenses... together we can generate more than enough forces to deter potential opponents, including if they act concurrently."⁽²²⁾

The renaming of the DoD to the DoW is the most significant divergence from traditional US strategy, signaling that Washington is no longer interested in stability operations or counterinsurgency but is ready for preemptive and high-intensity conventional war against peer adversaries like Russia and China, and "rogue" states like Iran and North Korea.

The next problematic issue is of "limited support" to allies referred to in both the reports. The assertion that the United States must be ready to fight simultaneous major wars if allies fail creates a paradox: the United States wants allies to fight their own wars, but if they do not, the United States must fight everyone.

"As US forces focus on Homeland defense and the Indo-Pacific, our allies and partners elsewhere will take primary responsibility for their own defense with critical but more limited support from American forces."⁽²³⁾

The third noticeable paradox is the claim that Iran has been "greatly weakened" and peace has been secured owing to the success of operations Midnight Hammer and Rough Rider; the latter was launched against Iran's regional proxy, the Houthis — hence, suggesting that the "peace" is fragile and dependent on continuous, high-intensity military pressure. The NSS and NDS were both released weeks before the February 28 attacks on Iran, which culminated in a regional war.

"Iran's regime is weaker and more vulnerable than it has been in decades... Even so, although Iran has suffered severe setbacks over recent months, it appears intent on reconstituting its conventional military forces."⁽²⁴⁾

Undoubtedly, the DIB is the United States' bottleneck which impinges upon "peace through strength;" and "deterrence by denial" without a massive reform in industrial, procurement and other related policies and procedures. "The huge gap, demonstrated in recent conflicts, between low-cost drones and missiles versus the expensive systems required to defend against them has laid bare our need to change and adapt. America requires a national mobilization to innovate powerful defenses at low cost."⁽²⁵⁾

Since bureaucracies are resilient to change and reform, hiccups in the DIB can drag the entire strategy down. All the while, China will be responding to the impending challenge with its trademark commitment and pace.

Table 1: Comparison of NSS 2025 With NDS 2026

Dimension	NSS 2025 (Vision)	NDS 2026 (Execution)	Analysis of Alignment/Tension
Core Vision	“America First” & Sovereignty: Rejects globalism, emphasizes “peace through strength” and prioritizes core national interests over moral imperatives at home and abroad.	Department of War & Warrior Ethos: Operationalizes the philosophy by renaming the DoD, rejecting “utopian idealism” and focusing on “winning wars decisively.”	Perfect Alignment: The NDS translates the NSS’s political rhetoric into a military culture of aggression and lethality. The renaming to “War” is the ultimate embodiment of the NSS’s “flexible realism.”
Middle East Strategy	Shift Burdens, Build Peace: Claims Iran is “greatly weakened” and the region is no longer a top priority. Focuses on Israel as a “model ally” and expanding the Abraham Accords.	Empower Regional Allies: Explicitly states the US will provide “critical but limited support” while regional partners (Israel and the Gulf states) take “primary responsibility” against Iran. Cites Operation Midnight Hammer as the turning point.	Strategic Consistency: Both documents agree the US is exiting the “nation-building” role. However, the NDS reveals the cost of the NSS’s optimism: the US had to launch a massive decapitation strike (Operation Midnight Hammer) to create the “weakness” the NSS claims exists.
Alliance Management	Burden-Sharing: Demands allies pay more (NATO 5% GDP). Views allies as “partners, not “dependents.”	Primary Responsibility: Codifies the 5% GDP target. Explicitly shifts the burden of Europe, the Middle East and Korea to allies. US support is “limited.”	High Risk: The NSS sets the <i>demand</i> ; the NDS sets the <i>expectation</i> . The tension lies in whether allies can actually meet the 5% target and fight their own wars without US leadership. If they fail, the US is left with the “simultaneity problem” it tried to avoid.

Dimension	NSS 2025 (Vision)	NDS 2026 (Execution)	Analysis of Alignment/Tension
China Strategy	Win the Economic Future: Focuses on trade, supply chains and preventing Chinese dominance. Military deterrence is secondary to economic strength.	Deterrence by Denial: Focuses on the First Island Chain and military denial. “Strength,” not “confrontation.”	Complementary: The NSS handles the economic war; the NDS handles the military shield. The NDS’s “denial defense” is the military backbone required to make the NSS’s economic decoupling possible.
Homeland Defense	Golden Dome: Proposes a shield for the homeland.	Golden Dome: Makes it a top-line priority with specific focus on countering drones and missile barrages.	Direct Translation: The NDS turns the NSS’s concept into a concrete procurement and deployment priority.
Industrial Base	Reindustrialization: Focuses on reshoring, energy dominance and supply chain security.	Supercharge the DIB: Calls for a “national mobilization” to produce munitions at scale.	Critical Dependency: The NDS admits that the NSS’s goals (“peace through strength”) are impossible without a revived industrial base. The “once-in-a-century revival” is the linchpin of the entire strategy.
The “Peace” Paradox	Claims “unprecedented peace” in eight conflicts (including the US-Israel-Iran war) in eight months.	Cites Operation Midnight Hammer (obliterating Iran) and Operation Rough Rider as the means to achieve that peace.	The Critical Contradiction: The NSS claims “peace” was achieved through diplomacy. The NDS reveals that “peace” was achieved through decapitation strikes and massive force. The “peace” is a result of overwhelming violence, not negotiation. This suggests the NSS’s “diplomacy” was a cover for the NDS’s “war.”

Source: Author.

Iran as a Test for Trump’s “Peace Through Strength”

In the NSS and NDS, Israel is not just an ally; it is the cornerstone of the Middle East strategy. Trump’s vision relies on Israel to do the heavy lifting that the United States wants to avoid.

Israel as the Model Ally, Force Multiplier

The NSS explicitly calls Israel a “model ally” that is “able and willing to defend itself.” The strategy aims to “shift burdens,” so the United States can focus on China and the homeland. By empowering Israel with advanced technology, intelligence and diplomatic cover, the United States expects Israel to degrade Iran and its proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas) without requiring massive US troop deployments. “Israel showed that it was able and willing to defend itself... Yet rather than empower Israel, the last administration tied its hands. All the while... Israel is a model ally.”⁽²⁶⁾

This aligns with the “America First” goal of burden-shifting. If Israel can destroy Iran’s nuclear program (as in Operation Midnight Hammer), the United States achieves its security goals with minimal direct cost.

The chaos arises because the US strategy assumes that decapitation strikes (like Operation Midnight Hammer) will lead to a stable peace. In reality, these strikes trigger a cascade of asymmetric retaliation that the US strategy failed to fully anticipate or contain.

Essentially, the Trump administration is envisioning the ultimate sword (the DoW, Golden Dome, DIB) to fight the ultimate battles against adversaries (Russia, China and Iran). However, the scabbard (diplomacy, stability, allied cohesion) is fraying, and the recoil of the sword (regional chaos) threatens to shatter the very “America First” peace it seeks to secure.

Table 2: Israel: US Vision Versus Ground Reality

Trump’s Vision	How Israel Helps	How Israel Hurts US Interests
Burden-sharing	Israel takes the lead on Iran, freeing US resources for China.	Israel’s actions draw the US into a regional war, US bases in the region were targeted and shipping lanes were disrupted.
“Peace through strength”	Israel’s military prowess demonstrates US strength and deters adversaries.	Israel’s offensive strikes provoke asymmetric retaliation that overwhelms defenses and destabilizes the region.
Economic security	A secure Israel ensures a stable Middle East for trade and protects US interests.	The chaos (Strait of Hormuz closure, oil spikes) directly threatens US and allies’ economic security.

Trump's Vision	How Israel Helps	How Israel Hurts US Interests
Alliance management	Israel is the “model ally” that validates the “America First” approach.	The US is forced to bail out Israel with provisions of weapons and attacks on Iran and its militias. Besides, its GCC allies are compelled to absorb the repercussions, straining the “fairness” principle.

Source: Author.

Operation Epic Fury: From Decapitation Strikes to a Fragile Ceasefire

Launched on February 28, 2026, Operation Epic Fury is the most significant military escalation in the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq. Initiated by a coordinated US-Israeli strike package, the operation aimed to permanently degrade Iran’s nuclear program and decapitate its leadership through a strategy of “shock and awe.” However, rather than achieving the “unprecedented peace” promised in the NSS 2025, the operation triggered a rapid, uncontrolled escalation spiral that culminated in a fragile ceasefire mediated by Pakistan along with other partners, namely Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Egypt on April 8, 2026. Operation Epic Fury commenced in the pre-dawn hours of February 28, 2026. The intent was to complete unfinished business from Operation Midnight Hammer. Utilizing B-1 Lancer bombers, F-35 stealth fighters and cruise missiles, the United States and Israel targeted Iran’s primary underground nuclear facilities at Natanz and Fordow, as well as the command bunkers of the supreme leader in Tehran. The operation was designed to “obliterate” Iran’s nuclear capabilities and remove the leadership in a single, decisive blow.⁽²⁷⁾ The strikes were successful in their immediate tactical objectives: Iran’s nuclear enrichment infrastructure was severely damaged and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed. The US administration declared the operation a triumph of “peace through strength,” asserting that the removal of the leadership would force a collapse of the resistance network.⁽²⁸⁾

However, the strategic calculus failed to account for the “balance of threat” dynamics in the region. Instead of capitulating, the Iranian establishment, operating from deep underground command centers, activated a pre-planned retaliation protocol. On March 1, Iran launched its first wave of ballistic missiles, including the hypersonic Kheibar Shekan, targeting Tel Aviv, the Dimona nuclear research center and US military bases in the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. This marked the transition from a controlled decapitation strike to a multifront regional war. The sheer volume of the Iranian response, i.e., over 200 missiles in the first 48 hours, overwhelmed the layered air defenses of Israel and the United States, causing significant civilian casualties and damaging critical infrastructure.⁽²⁹⁾

The escalation intensified on April 4 with the “Easter Miracle” rescue operation. Following the shoot-down of an F-15E Strike Eagle, US Special Forces (SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force) executed a high-risk extraction of the weapons systems officer (WSO) deep inside Iranian territory near Shiraz. While the rescue was a tactical success, it served as a critical escalation node. The deployment of special operations forces so deep into enemy territory, coupled with the destruction of four US aircraft during the firefight, signaled to Tehran that the United States was preparing for a ground invasion. This perception, driven by the US “never leave behind” identity norm, eliminated any possibility of a diplomatic off-ramp and pushed Iran to escalate to the highest levels of conflict.⁽³⁰⁾

By April 10, the conflict had reached the “top of the escalation ladder.” Iran, seeking to inflict maximum economic pain on the United States and its allies, mined the Strait of Hormuz and sank two commercial tankers. Global oil prices surged past \$126 per barrel,⁽³¹⁾ triggering a worldwide economic panic. The closure of the strait threatened the “America First” economic pillar as the US economy faced immediate recessionary pressures. Having suffered direct missile strikes on their soil simultaneously, the GCC states exercised self-restraint and strategic patience despite being part of the US alliance; Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced a policy of “armed neutrality” and closed their airspace to US combat aircraft and pushed for immediate mediation.⁽³²⁾

The crisis reached its zenith in late April as the United States deployed nuclear-powered submarines to the Arabian Gulf, a move echoing the high-stakes naval posturing of the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁽³³⁾ While no explicit nuclear threat was issued by Tehran, the mere presence of US strategic assets in the region, combined with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, created a “security dilemma” where the risk of accidental escalation became paramount.⁽³⁴⁾

On March 27, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that the strait was closed to maritime traffic to and from the ports of the United States, Israel and their allies. By the end of April, 20,000 mariners and 2,000 ships were stranded in the Arabian Gulf.⁽³⁵⁾ Just as the US- Israeli military campaign launched on February 28 against Iran is illegal, so too as are Iran’s attacks on neighboring states. Moreover, the closure of the waterway breached the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea by denying transit in a strait used for international shipping.

Amidst soaring oil prices and the shortage of other vital commodities, both Washington and Tehran recognized that the cost of continued hostilities outweighed any potential gains and agreed to a ceasefire on day 39 of the war, i.e., April 8. Pakistan hosted the Islamabad Talks from April 10 to April 11 — attended by US Vice President JD Vance and Iran’s Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf — serving as a critical off-ramp to prevent a catastrophic spiral, albeit the parleys ended without the much-anticipated breakthrough.⁽³⁶⁾

The ceasefire was not a peace treaty but a “fragile truce” born of mutual exhaustion. The agreement mandated the immediate cessation of hostilities, the removal of mines from the Strait of Hormuz and a halt to offensive strikes. However, it lacked a formal mechanism for resolving the underlying political grievances or the status of Iran’s nuclear program. The ceasefire effectively ended Operation Epic Fury, but it left the region in a state of “cold peace,” with the United States having failed to achieve its strategic goal of regime change and Iran having survived the decapitation strikes. The operation demonstrated that while military dominance could destroy infrastructure, it could not easily manufacture political stability, validating the theoretical critique that “strength without an exit strategy is the fastest route to disaster.”⁽³⁷⁾

Theoretical Deconstruction: A Four-lens Analysis of Strategic Failure

Lens 1: Game Theory – The Misread Game

Although Iran bears a significant share of responsibility for the outbreak of the war due to its intransigent stance in the pre-war negotiations, the 2026 conflict serves as a stark illustration of a strategic misreading where the United States treated a complex geopolitical crisis as a simple contest of dominance, only to trigger a catastrophic “game of chicken.”⁽³⁸⁾ The Trump administration’s NSS and NDS operated on the assumption that overwhelming military superiority, specifically the decapitation strikes of Operation Epic Fury, would force Iran to “swerve” and capitulate. However, this calculation failed to account for the existential nature of the Iranian “resistance” identity, which rendered retreat politically impossible. Instead of backing down, Iran matched US-Israeli aggression, turning the game into a collision where both sides suffered massive losses.

Likewise, the US strategy ignored the “prisoner’s dilemma” facing the GCC.⁽³⁹⁾ Washington assumed the Gulf states would “cooperate” by hosting US forces to share the burden of defense. Yet, once Iranian missiles targeted US bases in some Gulf states, the majority of these states refrained from participating in the conflict and their rational calculus shifted. The cost of cooperation, i.e., becoming the primary target of Iranian retaliation, far outweighed the benefits of alliance. Consequently, the GCC states started to “defect,” seeking neutrality and mediation to ensure their own security.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This restraint deprived the United States of some of its key regional assets, compelling it to wage a multifront war without the support or backing of its most important Gulf allies.⁽⁴¹⁾ The quagmire of 2026 was not caused by a lack of power but a failure to recognize that in a “game of chicken,” driving straight does not guarantee a win; it often guarantees a “crash.”⁽⁴²⁾ The United States played for dominance but the reality was a game of mutual destruction where rational actors, trapped by identity and fear, chose the path of ruin over the path of compromise.

Lens 2: Walt's Balance of Threat Theory

The dynamics of the US-GCC alliance in 2026 validate Walt's balance of threat theory, which posits that states balance against threat, which is a composite of power, proximity, offensive capability and aggressive intent, rather than power alone.⁽⁴³⁾ The Trump administration's strategy erroneously assumed that degrading Iran's material power through Operation Epic Fury would automatically reduce the threat to the region.⁽⁴⁴⁾ However, by executing a decapitation strike that killed the supreme leader and obliterated nuclear sites, the United States maximized its own aggressive intent.

To the GCC, the strikes on Iran were a US decision made without consulting its allies. Iran alleged that some of these strikes were launched from bases on GCC soil, using this as a pretext to launch its own attacks against the Gulf states.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Consequently, the GCC did not show restraint out of sympathy for Iran but out of a rational calculation that the threat posed by unchecked US-Israeli aggression now exceeded the threat from a weakened Iran. This shift in threat perception explains the recalibration of the GCC states' calculations toward the coalition with the United States, avoiding involvement in the war, and their pivot toward the Islamabad Talks. As a former Saudi policy czar and public intellectual aptly articulated, "Through the wisdom and foresight of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom avoided the horrors of war and its devastating repercussions. Indeed, together with Pakistan, it is now extinguishing the fire of fighting, helping prevent escalation, and giving advocates of peace hope that they can feel reassured about the lives of their loved ones and the safety of their interests."⁽⁴⁶⁾

The "America First" doctrine, intended to secure allies through strength, inadvertently alienated them by failing to recognize that in the calculus of survival, intent often outweighs capability. The alliance fractured not because the United States was too weak but because its aggressive posture made it the greater danger to its own partners.

Lens 3: Wendt's Constructivism

The inability of the United States to de-escalate the 2026 conflict, despite mounting economic costs, is best explained by Wendt's constructivism, which argues that state behavior is driven by social identities and norms rather than purely material calculations.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The Trump administration's rebranding of the Department of Defense to the Department of War created a powerful normative imperative: the United States was now a "warrior" that could not retreat without violating its core identity.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This identity trap became most critical during the "Easter Miracle" rescue operation. A rational actor, weighing costs against benefits, might have accepted the loss of an F-15E pilot to avoid escalating the war. However, the US military's deeply ingrained "never leave behind" norm made such a sacrifice politically and culturally impossible.

By executing a high-risk special operations mission deep inside Iranian territory during a high-intensity war, the United States signaled to Tehran that it was preparing for a ground invasion. This interpretation, filtered through Iran's own "resistance" identity, forced Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz in order to deter the anticipated invasion. The United States was thus locked into an inescapable escalation spiral by its own identity norms. The "never leave behind" imperative, while morally sound, strategically doomed the "peace through strength" doctrine by eliminating any diplomatic off-ramp. The tragedy of 2026 was that the United States prioritized the validation of its identity over strategic flexibility, proving that when a state's "self" is at stake, rational de-escalation becomes impossible.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The conflict did not end because the United States ran out of options but because its identity refused to allow it to swerve.

Lens 4: Escalation Ladder Theory

The transformation of Operation Epic Fury from "controlled" decapitation strikes into a regional conflagration is best understood through escalation ladder theory, which reveals how the United States misjudged the mechanics of conflict escalation.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The NSS and NDS operated on the false assumption that the United States could climb the ladder to a specific rung — Rung 30 (decapitation of leadership)⁽⁵¹⁾ — and then "step off" into a stable peace. However, the 2026 war demonstrated that the ladder is a slippery slope where climbing one rung locks the player into the next, driven by reciprocal fear and the absence of viable off-ramps.

The US launch of Operation Epic Fury (Rung 30) was intended to be the peak of the conflict, [see Table 3]. Instead, Iran's refusal to "swerve" forced the United States to climb to Rung 35 (massive defense), and the "Easter Miracle" rescue (Rung 38) signaled an imminent ground invasion, pushing Iran to Rung 40 (proxy surge) [see Table 4] and eventually to Rung 42 (closure of the Strait of Hormuz). The US signal was so "costly," i.e., the killing of the supreme leader and the destruction of nuclear sites, that it eliminated any face-saving exit for Iran.⁽⁵²⁾ There was no Rung 25 to retreat to; the only way down was a catastrophic crash manifested in standing on the brink of global economic collapse [see Table 5]. The United States misjudged the process of escalation, treating the ladder as a menu of discrete options rather than a self-reinforcing commitment device. By failing to recognize that the momentum of fear overrides strategic control, the United States allowed targeted strikes to spiral into a near-nuclear crisis, proving that strength without a clear exit strategy is the fastest route to disaster.⁽⁵³⁾

Ascending the Escalation Ladder [February 26 to April 26, 2026]

This timeline traces the conflict from pre-strike tensions to the decapitation strikes, the uncontrolled spiral, the economic climax and the fragile de-escalation, mapping every major event to Herman Kahn's 44-rung escalation ladder.

Table 3: Phase 1 | The Pre-strike & “Controlled Climb”
(February 26 – February 28, 2026)

The United States launches a “surgical” strike, believing it can control the escalation ladder.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Feb 26	Final Intelligence Fusion: CIA and Mossad confirm the supreme leader’s location. US B-1s and F-35s move to Diego Garcia and Al Udeid.	Rung 12 (<i>Crisis Mobilization</i>)	Pre-Conflict Posturing	Signaling: The movement of assets is a “Costly Signal” of intent, but Iran misreads it as preparation for invasion, not just airstrikes.
Feb 27	Diplomatic Ultimatum: The US issues a public warning: “Disperse nuclear assets or face consequences.” Iran rejects it, calling it a “bluff.”	Rung 15 (<i>Diplomatic Threats</i>)	Failed De-escalation	Game of Chicken: Both sides refuse to “swerve.” The US believes the threat will force a retreat; Iran believes the threat is a prelude to regime change.
Feb 28 (04:00)	Operation Epic Fury: US/Israel launch 100+ cruise missiles and stealth bombers. Supreme leader killed; Natanz/Fordow destroyed.	Rung 28-30 (<i>Major Conventional War / Strategic Decapitation</i>)	The “Intended Peak”	The Miscalculation: The US assumes this is the <i>end</i> of the ladder, believing that destroying the leadership will force a surrender.

Table 4: Phase 2 | Spiral & “Crash” (March 1 – March 10, 2026)

The ladder becomes slippery. Iran refuses to “swerve,” the United States gets locked in by identity norms.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 1	First Wave Retaliation: Iran launches 50 ballistic missiles at Tel Aviv and Dimona. Iron Dome intercepts 80%, but 10 hit.	Rung 32-34 (<i>Large-Scale Conventional Attack</i>)	The “Spiral” Begins	Balance of Threat: Iran perceives Rung 30 as existential. The “resistance” identity demands a response to survive.
Mar 2	Massive Barrage & GCC Hits: 200+ missiles hit Israel and US bases in Qatar (Al Udeid) and Bahrain. 40+ US personnel injured.	Rung 35-37 (<i>Full-Scale Regional War</i>)	The “Crash”	Prisoner’s Dilemma: Some GCC states realize “cooperation” (hosting US bases) = high cost (bombing). This prompted them to defect and reassess their positions on the conflict, deepening mistrust with Washington.
Mar 3	The “Easter Miracle” Rescue: US SEAL Team 6/Delta Force extract the downed F-15E WSO near Shiraz. 4 US aircraft destroyed; nine Iranians KIA.	Rung 38-40 (<i>Special Ops in Active War Zone</i>)	Accidental Escalation	Constructivism: The “never leave behind” norm forces a high-risk rescue. Iran interprets this as a prelude to Ground Invasion , pushing the ladder higher.
Mar 4	GCC Defection: Saudi Arabia and the UAE announce “neutrality,” closing airspace to US combat flights. Pakistan offers mediation.	Rung 39 (<i>Alliance Fracture</i>)	The “Alliance Collapse”	Balance of Threat: The GCC now perceives the US as the greater threat due to its aggressive intent. They defect to save their economies.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 5-7	Proxy Surge: Hezbollah (Lebanon) and the Houthis (Yemen) launch massive drone/mis- sile swarms at Israel and shipping lanes.	Rung 40-41 (<i>Multifront Asymmetric War</i>)	The “Ring of Fire”	Game Theory: Iran uses proxies to escalate without direct state-to-state war, testing US resolve.

Table 5: Phase 3 | Economic Climax & The “Brink”
(March 10 – March 25, 2026)

The conflict spills beyond the region. The highest rung of the ladder is reached, threatening global collapse.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 10	Strait of Hormuz Closure: Iran mines the strait; sinks two commercial tankers. Global oil prices spike to \$180/barrel.	Rung 42-43 (Global Economic Collapse / Strategic Blockade)	The “Top of the Ladder”	Mutually Assured Destruction (Economic): The US economy is now directly threatened. The “America First” economic pillar is crumbling.
Mar 15	Cyber & Grid War: US launches Operation Silent Storm (a massive cyberattack) on Iran’s power grid. Iran retaliates with cyberattacks on US banks.	Rung 43 (Cyber Warfare / Critical Infrastructure)	Total War Expansion	Signaling: Both sides demonstrate the ability to destabilize the other’s homeland without firing a shot.
Mar 20	Nuclear Shadow: Iranian state media hints at “tactical nuclear options” if the US invades. US moves nuclear subs to the region.	Rung 44-45 (Tactical Nuclear Threat)	The “Brink”	Game of Chicken (Final): Both sides stare into the abyss. The risk of accidental nuclear war is now high.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 22	Global Panic: Stock markets crash. IMF calls for emergency ceasefire. US Congress debates “full mobilization.”	Rung 45 (Global Crisis)	Systemic Failure	The “Slippery Slope” Peak: The conflict has consumed the entire global system. The US cannot win without destroying the world economy.

Table 6: Phase 4 | Forced Descent & Fragile Truce (March 26 – April 26, 2026)
Economic desperation forces a retreat. The ladder is climbed down, but no true peace is reached.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 26	Islamabad Talks Begin: US, Iran and GCC representatives meet in Islamabad. Pakistan mediates.	Rung 40 (High-Level Negotiation)	The “Desperate Retreat”	Game Theory: The “cost of war” now exceeds the “benefit of victory” for both sides.
April 8	The “Fragile Truce:” Ceasefire agreed. Iran promises to stop mining Hormuz; US agrees to halt offensive strikes. No formal peace treaty.	Rung 20-25 (Ceasefire / Coercive Deterrence)	The “Forced Descent”	Sub-Optimal Equilibrium: Both sides lose (US economy hurt, Iranian establishment weakened but intact).
Apr 15	Aftermath Review: US releases report on Operation Epic Fury. Admits “strategic miscalculation” on GCC reaction.	Rung 15 (Post-Conflict Assessment)	Reflection	Constructivism: The US begins to grapple with the “identity trap” that locked them in.
Apr 26	New Normal: Region remains tense. US shifts to “offshore balancing.” Iran begins rebuilding its nuclear program in secret.	Rung 10-12 (Cold Peace / Tension)	The “New Status Quo”	The Cycle Continues: The “game of chicken” is paused, but the drivers of the conflict (identity, threat) remain.

The unexpected outcomes of the 2026 campaign cannot be attributed to a deficiency in US military capability. Rather, it stemmed from a fundamental misalignment between the static strategic design of the NSS and the dynamic, fluid realities of the conflict. By applying a four-lens theoretical framework, an attempt has been made to isolate the specific mechanisms that transformed “controlled” decapitation strikes into a multifront regional war. The analysis reveals that the United States did not merely lose a battle of attrition; it lost the game of strategy itself by misreading the nature of the conflict, the perceptions of its allies, the constraints of its own identity and the mechanics of escalation.

In synthesis, the 2026 war represents a convergence of these four theoretical failures. The game theory error of playing “chicken” was exacerbated by the balance of threat miscalculation that alienated allies. The constructivist identity trap prevented the US from “swerving” when the ladder became slippery, and the escalation ladder misjudgement turned controlled strikes into a regional conflagration. Together, these lenses explain how a strategy designed for “peace through strength” resulted in “war through strength,” transforming a vision of strategic dominance into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability. The tragedy of 2026 is not that the United States lacked the power to win but that it lacked the theoretical foresight to understand the game it was playing.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the 2026 Iran conflict serves as a definitive stress test for the “America First” doctrine, revealing that the NSS and NDS represent not a viable path toward sovereign stability but a high-risk gamble with catastrophic returns. The administration’s strategy was predicated on a fundamental miscalculation: the belief that military dominance could substitute for political stabilization and that “controlled” decapitation strikes would force a compliant peace. Instead, the pursuit of peace through strength via proxy warfare and identity-driven commitment inadvertently exacerbated the very regional chaos it aimed to contain.

By treating the conflict as a simple contest of dominance, the United States triggered a “game of chicken” that ended in a collision rather than a victory. The strategy’s reliance on aggressive intent to degrade Iran’s power paradoxically maximized the threat perception among Gulf allies, fracturing the very coalition necessary for regional security. Furthermore, the rigid adherence to “warrior” identity norms, particularly the “never leave behind” imperative, locked the United States into an inescapable escalation spiral, eliminating the diplomatic off-ramps required to de-escalate. The result was a slippery slope up the escalation ladder, where the absence of a face-saving exit for Iran forced the conflict to the brink of global economic collapse.

Consequently, the vision of strategic dominance was transformed into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability. The “peace” achieved was not a durable settlement but a fragile ceasefire born of exhaustion, leaving the region

more unstable than before. The 2026 crisis demonstrates that in an era of complex interdependence and identity-driven politics, strength without flexibility and dominance without an exit strategy, does not secure the nation but endangers it. True stability requires not just the capacity to strike but the wisdom to know when to swerve.

The path forward for the United States and Iran remains perilously narrow, defined by a fragile deterrence rather than genuine reconciliation. In the short term, both sides will likely engage in covert, back-channel negotiations mediated by intermediaries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia or Türkiye, focusing narrowly on crisis de-escalation.

The risk of renewed war is imminent and high due to three structural factors:

- With no formal peace, the United States, Israel and Iran will continue to wage a relentless shadow war via cyberattacks, sabotage and proxy strikes. A single miscalculation such as a successful attack on a US carrier or a critical Iranian nuclear breakthrough could instantly reignite the escalation ladder.
- The US “warrior” identity and Iran’s “resistance” narrative remain incompatible. Neither side can afford to appear weak domestically, making diplomatic concessions politically toxic and increasing the likelihood of “demonstration strikes” to prove resolve.
- Without a face-saving mechanism to resolve the core dispute over nuclear weapons, any future crisis will lack the diplomatic off-ramps that prevented total war in 2026.

The United States, Israel and Iran are not at peace; they are merely paused. Unless a fundamental shift occurs in threat perception or identity construction, the region is poised for a recurrence of conflict within a year or so, where the next escalation could be even more catastrophic than the last.

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