

The Illusion of Control: Miscalculation and the Road to War with Iran

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In a [single press conference](#) aboard Air Force One, President Trump advanced mutually contradictory claims. He asserted that the United States had brought peace to the Middle East after 3,000 years of conflict by destroying Iran's nuclear programme, while simultaneously giving Iran ten days to conclude a nuclear agreement. If the nuclear programme has already been eliminated, the rationale for negotiation becomes unclear, as does the logic of threatening a conflict that would ostensibly undo the peace he claims to have secured.

Let us not be distracted by President Trump's appetite for headlines, which often produces contradictory statements, and instead focus on a single question: why is the United States heading toward a war with Iran?

Coercion Without War

Following the twelve-day Israel–U.S. war on Iran, I have [argued](#) that the United States is unlikely to wage another war unless it is prepared to pursue regime change. Such an objective would require the deployment of tens of thousands of troops on Iranian soil—something the Trump administration has shown no willingness to undertake.

However, when Trump claimed concern for the Iranian people, [declared](#) that “help” was on its way, and simultaneously positioned aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines, and strategic bombers in the region—the [largest](#) U.S. military buildup there since the 2003 invasion of Iraq—it became evident that Washington's objective was to coerce Iran into accepting an agreement it would otherwise reject.

By manufacturing an atmosphere of fear, the Trump administration appears to hope that psychological pressure alone will force Iran to accept its conditions for “peace by force,” i.e., for “peace by subjugation”: dismantling its nuclear programme, restricting its missile capabilities to short range, and abandoning its regional alliances. If fear succeeds, it would constitute a clean victory for Trump. If it does not, the logic escalates toward a limited strike intended to impose compliance; should that fail, it points toward a sustained air campaign lasting weeks, aimed at degrading Iran's military, its leaderships and potentially its civilian infrastructure.

Yet this logic rests on a precarious assumption. It is akin to walking a tightrope while hoping not to fall; it assumes that Iran would deliberately confine the conflict to a limited war in order to preserve its regime. But what if Iran chooses a comprehensive regional war instead? Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has already [stated](#): “The Americans should know that if they start a war, this time it will be a regional war.” [Hezbollah](#), the [Houthis](#), and several [Iraqi military groups](#) have made clear that they would not remain neutral in any war aimed at Iran. Miscalculation is not a stable strategy; it is a slippery path.

The Cost of Escalation

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that the costs of war are precisely what have restrained the United States. Consider the following scenario: once American aircraft and missiles begin striking Iran, Iran and its allies respond by targeting Israel and U.S. military bases across the Middle East. They could also close the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, strike oil installations in the Gulf, and attack American economic and political interests throughout the region.

If such actions were to inflict significant American losses, the United States would be compelled—out of a perceived need to save face—to escalate. That escalation would likely take one of two forms. The first would involve deploying tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands of troops to overthrow the Iranian regime, signalling a forceful return to large-scale U.S. military engagement in the Middle East. Such a move would directly contradict [Trump’s National Security Strategy](#), which calls for avoiding “forever wars,” states explicitly that the days when the Middle East dominated U.S. foreign policy are “over,” and emphasises shifting greater regional security responsibility to partners, above all Israel. The second option would be the use of nuclear weapons to impose a decisive end to the conflict, presented as an alternative to deep military entanglement.

Both options, however, carry immense political and economic costs that the United States would be unwilling to bear. A large-scale troop deployment would almost certainly erode the domestic political base that brought Trump to power under the [slogan](#) “no more foreign wars,” and would likely exact heavy electoral costs on the Republican Party.

Beyond domestic politics, renewed entanglement in the Middle East would prevent the United States from devoting sufficient military, financial, and political resources to confronting China, tightening pressure on Europe, or sustaining its coercive policies in Latin America. History suggests that once drawn back into the region, the United States would be unable to exit again for at least two decades, as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The costs of escalation would not be only political or strategic; they would also be economic. In the short term—within the first few months of war—any sustained disruption of the Strait of Hormuz or major strikes on regional oil infrastructure would likely trigger a [sharp rise](#) in global energy prices. Such a shock would feed rapidly into [inflation](#), raising the cost of food, transport, and air travel, and would likely be accompanied by rising unemployment.

War itself would also impose immense fiscal costs. By Trump's [own account](#), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the United States approximately seven trillion dollars—an experience that has left a deep imprint on domestic political calculations. A renewed large-scale conflict in the Middle East would almost certainly erode the political base that brought Trump to power under the banner of ending “forever wars,” while constraining the United States’ ability to concentrate resources on priorities elsewhere, from China to Europe and Latin America.

The second option—resorting to nuclear weapons to end the conflict quickly—does have historical precedent. Yet using them today would amount to signalling that nuclear weapons are acceptable instruments for resolving conventional conflicts. What, then, would prevent Russia from doing the same in Ukraine if the United States were to employ them against Iran? Nuclear weapons are therefore not a viable option for Washington. They are [designed for deterrence](#) and, at most, as a last resort in situations of existential threat—not as tools of coercive war-termination.

These prohibitive costs are precisely what have prevented a U.S. war on Iran in the past, and they should, in principle, continue to do so today. Previous U.S. presidents—George W. Bush, Obama, and Biden—refrained from striking Iran’s nuclear facilities primarily out of concern over Iran’s likely response. For this reason, President Bush [resisted](#) Israeli pressure to escalate and, in Obama’s case, turned to negotiation and a formal [agreement](#), the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, having [concluded](#) that the alternative was a war whose costs were well understood and deemed unacceptable.

The Risk of Miscalculation

In fact, two additional variables further reduce the likelihood of an all-out regional war. First, with the exception of Israel, U.S. allies in the region—including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey—have expressed clear [opposition](#) to a war with Iran, citing the immense political, economic, and security costs such a conflict would impose across the region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states have [informed](#) Iran that they would not permit their airspace or territory to be used for a U.S. attack.

Second, Trump’s political temperament favours short interventions, decisive outcomes, and conflicts that impose no visible costs on American forces—a Venezuela-style approach rather than a prolonged war. Jeremy Shapiro of the European Council on Foreign Relations identifies a [similar pattern](#) in Trump’s use of force: a preference for limited strikes, achievable objectives, and the avoidance of extended involvement and large troop deployments. Taken together, these factors point away from a sustained regional war.

However, two intervening variables render this logic less certain. The first concerns Iran's previous responses to the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, and to subsequent U.S. attacks on its nuclear facilities. In both instances, Iran acted with notable restraint. Following Soleimani's killing, Tehran ensured that [advance warning](#) reached the U.S. side—via intermediaries—before striking the Ayn al-Asad base in Iraq. It adopted a [similar](#) signalling strategy when it later struck the Al-Udeid base in Qatar after U.S. attacks on its nuclear facilities.

In the Al-Udeid case, Trump publicly [thanked](#) Iran for providing prior warning. In the Soleimani case, he later pointed to the killing as evidence that decisive strikes could be carried out without triggering uncontrollable escalation, [declaring](#) that “we killed the number one terrorist in the world, Soleimani, and it should have been done 20 years ago.”

It is precisely because Iran did not respond decisively the first time that the United States felt emboldened to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025. And because, in Trump's assessment, those strikes also failed to provoke severe retaliation, Washington may now believe it can go further—targeting Iran's leadership, military assets, or even civilian infrastructure—without incurring serious consequences.

Like his predecessors, Trump is aware of the costs of war and is reluctant to incur them. What distinguishes him, however, is a belief—shaped by past encounters—that the United States can strike Iran without provoking serious retaliation. Those experiences may lead him to assume that renewed bombing, targeted assassinations, economic siege, or some combination thereof would again produce no meaningful consequences. He may be correct, based on precedent—but he may also be wrong. This is precisely where miscalculation lies: in the assumption that Iran will not follow through on its publicly stated commitment to respond decisively to any American attack.

If Iran communicates clearly and unequivocally what it will do in the event of an attack, the United States' fear of bearing the resulting costs may once again deter war, as it has in the past, allowing diplomacy to provide Trump with a face-saving path down from the very high position he has climbed.

If, however, Iran responds with hesitation or signals fear—particularly by making concessions on issues it has long declared non-negotiable, such as its right to enrich uranium, its missile capabilities for self-defence, or its independent regional policy—this would likely produce the opposite effect. Rather than preventing war, such concessions would invite renewed pressure from the United States and Israel, encouraging them to return with additional demands, once again enforced through the threat of military escalation.

A second, more indirect factor complicates this analysis: the erosion of accountability among transnational elites. The recent revelations surrounding the Epstein case are not merely a scandal involving individual criminality; they have exposed the degree to which powerful political, financial, media, academic, and cultural actors can operate with sustained immunity from legal, moral, and institutional constraint.

This does not allow us to infer that such informal elite networks directly determine U.S. decision-making on Iran. It does, however, point to a broader transformation in the political environment within which decisions about war and peace are made. Analyses of international conflict typically assume that state behaviour is constrained by interests, costs, public opinion, international law, and reputational risk. Yet they struggle to account for persistent moral contradictions—for example, the public [condemnation](#) by U.S. and European leaders of repression in Iran alongside the justification or silence surrounding documented Israel's crimes in Gaza.

The Epstein case suggests that these constraints have weakened at precisely the level where strategic decisions are shaped and legitimised. The significance of this shift lies not in hidden coordination, but in diminished accountability. When elites repeatedly evade consequences for criminal conduct, the threshold for recklessness rises. Policies that impose immense economic, moral, or human costs become easier to pursue, even when they diverge sharply from public priorities.

This dynamic is visible in the growing disjunction between public opinion and elite policy choices. [Polls](#) in the United States consistently show that Americans' foremost concerns are the cost of living, health care, and housing, while questions of war rank far lower. Yet political and media elites increasingly normalise military escalation, despite its misalignment with the priorities of the American public and with the interests of most regional allies, with the notable exception of Israel. The Epstein case does not explain this divergence—but it illuminates the conditions under which it has become politically sustainable.

Conclusion

The question, then, is not whether the costs of war with Iran are excessively high—they clearly are—but whether those costs are being correctly perceived. History suggests that deterrence has held not because war was impossible, but because its consequences were feared. The danger today lies in the erosion of that fear, produced by past episodes of Iranian restraint and reinforced by a political environment in which accountability is increasingly thinned.

War with Iran is neither inevitable nor irrational in theory; it becomes plausible only through miscalculation. If Iran's restraint continues to be interpreted as weakness, and U.S.'s coercion as consequence-free, the very factors that once prevented war may no longer suffice. Avoiding catastrophe therefore depends less on further threats or displays of force than on restoring credible deterrence, clear signalling, and political accountability. The high cost of war can still prevent it—but only if those who contemplate it are once again forced to confront its reality.



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