



RCAS Commentary

Power, Prestige, And Perception: Decoding The Iran War's Outcome

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About RCAS

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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War is scarcely measured in terms of conquering territories or destroying battlefields in modern geopolitics. It is frequently quantified by three interrelated variables: power, prestige, and perception. This has been vividly demonstrated by the Iran war just witnessed. Although there were initial claims of a landmark military campaign by Washington and Tel Aviv, meant to bring Tehran to its knees, the end result points to a much more complex and uncomfortable reality: that, in the strategic sense, Iran was neither a loser nor a winner. Instead, the war revealed not only the political, diplomatic, and reputational vulnerabilities of the United States and its allies but also altered perceptions of power in the region and internationally.



▲CBS News.

The size of the loss of Donald Trump can be traced to the day before the day of the ceasefire, as he said on Truth Social just two days ago that there would be no deal with Iran without unconditional surrender. Nevertheless, the last truce was not conditional on American conditions, but the Iranian ten-point program. Such words were quoted to include the right of Iran to proceed with its nuclear research, the military of the Strait of Hormuz, the withdrawal of the U.S troops in the Gulf and the removal of the sanctions. A country that conditions a ceasefire, is not giving away on core sovereignty, and is not giving up its strategic resources, can barely be described as defeated.

The event was summed up by former CIA Director Leon Panetta, who questioned whether it was Trump who first blinked, not Tehran. Washington could not fulfil his strategic goals, even though he was said to have tactically succeeded militarily. It was not the Iranians who toppled the regime. The American hands did not get hold of the secret enriched uranium reserves in Tehran. The American plea to fully open the Strait of Hormuz on the condition of international navigation was even rejected. Iran also welcomed the reopening of the waterway under military control.

The quick acceptance of the ceasefire by Trump seems to be heavily driven by domestic political needs. With the U.S. midterm elections around the corner, and people beginning to grow tired of inflation, economic stagnation and polarisation in society, the economic effects of the war were quickly becoming politically risky. The oil price increase and the decline in stock markets began to undermine popular opinion of the administration. As a person who initially adopted the escalation rhetoric, Trump quickly needed a way out. Washington gave its assent almost immediately after Pakistan allegedly assisted with a ceasefire offer. But, as is typical of Trump, he returned to his well-worn story of an alleged victory, even though it proves there was a strategic withdrawal, not a victory.

Another major blow to Washington diplomatically was the war. None of the U.S.'s major allies fully joined the conflict. The campaign was disowned by NATO partners; French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer were both quoted as saying it was not our war. Their disillusionment did not just lie in disagreement with the war, but also the sense of having been shortchanged by Washington, which made unilateral decisions. Repeated appeals by Trump to fellow supporters to come and help in seizing Hormuz were not received, and he was forced to go to the streets and attack NATO once more. His rage has now put the future of the transatlantic alliance into question. The previous statement by Macron that NATO is turning into a brain-dead body now seems less rhetorical and more prophetic.

The moral status of America was also damaged by Trump in the conflict. Even his own political base was horrified by not only his inflammatory rhetoric, like the threats that implied the destruction of the Iranian civilisation, but also by many of his own political base. This was denounced by the former President Joe Biden as possibly amounting to war crimes in spirit, and the phrase was warned by Nancy Pelosi to be weakening American values. Other influential observers, such as Thomas Friedman and David Ignatius, proceeded to opine that even the very international conventions and rules-based order that the United States claims to impose was being exceeded by threatening to wipe out a 90-million-person nation.

If Trump lost politically and diplomatically, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would most likely have lost strategically. The war seemed to Netanyahu to

be closely related to survival back home. Netanyahu had to have a military victory to consolidate power, with the allegations of corruption, lack of support in Gaza, and growing internal unrest. Israeli analyst Gideon Levy was right when he noted that Netanyahu had to have a war that he could decisively win to salvage his political future. This, however, was not so. Israel did not succeed in regime change in Tehran, it did not succeed in destroying Iranian military infrastructure in a decisive manner, and it did not succeed in showing its dominance in the region.

However, long-term security is not synonymous with Iran's survival. There is an ever-growing argument that, despite the fact that the change of military regimes has not been effective, instability in the country might occur even in times of peace. The Iranian economy remains fragile, citizens remain angry, and the capacity to survive the post-war reconstruction process, as well as sanctions, will put the Iranian leadership to the test. In this regard, Tehran has emerged from the war but enters the peace with enormous structural pressure.

Among the most obvious losers are the Gulf Arab states. They had disastrous economic effects. The counterattacks by Iranians are reported to have caused a lot of damage to the Emirati gas fields, and other observers believe that it could take years to mend. Previously sold as utterly secure, safe havens for global investment, these states might now find it difficult to maintain that reputation. Foreign investment confidence can be greatly eroded. Gulf leaders also found an ugly experience in the strategic sense: even though the U.S. military bases were located in the Gulf and relations with Israel were normalised, U.S.-Israeli alliances could not have assisted them in escaping the wrath of the Iranians. The Gulf's frustration with Washington and Tel Aviv is likely to have reached a peak, and the region is now facing the possibility of a grand diplomatic realignment, as observed by Marwan Muasher of Carnegie.

Pakistan can be the unexpected innocent victor in the war. Primarily because of their allegedly important mediating role in the ceasefire negotiations, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Asim Munir significantly enhanced Islamabad's diplomatic reputation. Trump has personally thanked the leadership of Pakistan, and Tehran has emerged from the war but enters the peace with enormous structural pressure.

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Pakistan can be the unexpected innocent victor in the war. Primarily because of their allegedly important mediating role in the ceasefire negotiations, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Asim Munir significantly enhanced Islamabad's diplomatic reputation. Trump has personally thanked the leadership of Pakistan, and Tehran has, too, been appreciative. The success of this mediation in Pakistan boosted its reputation at the local and global levels, making Islamabad increasingly relevant as a middle power in the diplomacy of the Muslim world. Pakistan is facing a strategic dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran because its recent defence agreement with Saudi Arabia has deepened Islamabad's security commitments to Riyadh, while Pakistan also seeks stable relations with neighbouring Iran for border security and regional balance. Analysts note Pakistan is trying to maintain neutrality despite pressure from both sides.

Another strategic beneficiary is China. Beijing was also effectively content with the weakening of U.S. alliances and credibility, and quietly aligned with both Pakistan and Iran without being actively involved. It is also the effects of the war that Russia enjoys. Directly strengthening oil prices empowers the energy revenues of the Moscow government, and the internal split within NATO and the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, particularly drones and missile interceptors, are key objectives of Russia's strategy on a large scale in the context of the global conflict.

India, among them, is one of the undesired casualties. As a run-up to the war, Prime Minister Narendra Modi caused both local and foreign criticism when he made a controversial visit to Israel. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi criticised Modi, saying he was destroying the image of India internationally, and commentators had questions about how it appeared to see India right next to Netanyahu in one of the most contentious wars. Indian balancing diplomacy is on the rise.

Both economically and diplomatically, Bangladesh was also a loser. If Gulf economies collapse due to war-related disruptions, millions of Bangladeshi expatriate workers in the region would be at risk of job loss and reduced remittances. Dhaka diplomatically first gave an extremely cautious and generic statement of concern at the conflict without necessarily condemning the actions of the U.S. or Israel. The lack of response by Bangladesh to the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was a blow to Tehran. The Iranian ambassador in Dhaka came out and gave a speech expressing his frustration that Iran had expected a friendly country to be stronger.

Dhaka followed up by offering condolences, although its reluctance to make accusations was part of a strategic reluctance that put Bangladesh in a diplomatically awkward position.

Finally, the war in Iran reveals an important reality of modern geopolitics: military superiority is not always a winning formula. America may possess unprecedented military strength, but power itself, without political strategy, diplomatic legitimacy, and even the fusion of alliances, cannot necessarily achieve strategic success. The Iranians may not have conquered their opponents, but by not giving in, making terms and keeping its independence, Iran had made perseverance look like victory. Lastly, the Iran war was not about who had destroyed more targets or fired more missiles. It was about who had prestige, who affected perception, and who was more politically strong. At that, Trump backed out, Netanyahu faltered, and Iran, with the strength of its existence, shifted the paradigm of what victory meant.

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