

Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

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DEAKIN CENTRE FOR
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Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence! Signal is a monthly publication by the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security.

With so much going on in the world, Signal has two aims:

1. To provide timely and short-form analysis of contemporary strategic, national security and defence issues
2. To offer insights into contemporary debates and controversies within the relevant fields of strategic studies, international relations, military history and war studies.

Signal will feature analysis from academic staff from the Centre for Future Defence and National Security. We welcome further contributions from the broader Deakin academic community and colleagues working at other academic institutions, think tanks and public service roles.

In this first edition we have four pieces focused on PLA purges in China, the war in Iran and US strategy. We hope you enjoy this April edition and look forward to returning with more analysis in May!

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Signal is edited by: Associate Professor Michael Clarke, Dr Claire Yorke and Associate Professor Michael Hatherell.

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Xi's PLA Purges: Mixing in Sand, Throwing Stones, and Digging up the Cornerstone?

Michael Clarke

Since 2022 approximately 100 senior officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been investigated, suspended or expelled from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), [including](#) the two uniformed Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Generals He Weidong and Zhou Youxia.

Speculation has been rife as to the causes and implications of this latest purge of the PLA by Xi Jinping. Some have spied 'pro' and 'anti' Xi 'factional' strife within the PLA as the root cause, while others have pointed to the long-standing pathology of corruption in the ranks as compelling Xi to new rounds of disciplinary action.

Just how fevered this speculation has become has been underscored by the online [publication](#) of a letter allegedly penned by General Zhang Youxia prior to his arrest in which the former CMC Vice-Chairman details policy disagreements with Xi Jinping and accuses him of promoting hundreds of officers loyal to him 'to form a gang in the army'. It should be noted that this letter remains unverified and there are reasons to be sceptical of its authenticity (notably the document's publication through Falun Gong-linked media outlets that have a [record](#) of spreading misinformation).

Mao Zedong, amidst his struggle to rein in the considerable power and influence the PLA had obtained during the Cultural Revolution under Marshal Lin Biao, [asserted](#) in late 1970 that his strategy would be to 'mix in sand', 'throw stones' and 'dig up the cornerstone'. The first alluded to shifting personnel within the military to unbalance networks tied to Lin, the second to intensifying political struggle between Lin's supporters and those loyal to Mao, and the third to Mao's reorganisation of the Beijing and Jinan Military Regions.

Xi Jinping's approach to managing Party-military relations since 2012 bears some resemblance to this with its focus on personnel shifts and systematic restructuring of the PLA. These endeavours suggest that Xi too has had to focus attention on enduring tensions in Party-military relations. Three analytical points of entry suggest themselves as being particularly important here: managing the balance between Party control and military autonomy; the dilemma of promoting 'red' or 'expert' in the military; and the role of 'factionalism'.



Three analytical points of entry suggest themselves as being particularly important here: managing the balance between Party control and military autonomy; the dilemma of promoting 'red' or 'expert' in the military; and the role of 'factionalism'.

First, these latest purges highlight that Xi Jinping is still grappling with what many past analyses call the ['conditional compliance'](#) model of Party-military relations in which the Party has granted the PLA a degree of autonomy on military issues in exchange for the military's political loyalty. Xi's major moves since 2012 – such as the reorganisation of the PLA in the 2015 'below the neck reforms' and the [institution](#) of the ["CMC Chairman Responsibility System"](#) – have, among other things, been concerned with tightening the Party's control and Xi's authority over the military.

Second, General Zhou's allusion to Xi's promotion of a loyal 'gang' of officers over those perhaps more proficient speaks to an enduring dilemma of 'red' versus 'expert' in Party-military relations. As [recent](#) analysis has reaffirmed, the drive to make the PLA both a more professional and operationally proficient military (i.e. expert) and politically loyal (i.e. red) remains a central challenge for Xi Jinping.

In the first wave of purges of the PLA after Xi became General Secretary in 2013-2015, Xi ultimately [targeted](#) generals and officers loyal to his political rivals and sought to assert his control over the PLA, and reduce resistance to ambitious military reform plans. This paved the way for the sweeping 'below the neck' reforms of the PLA in 2015 which, among other things, [did away](#) with the "CMC-headquarters command system, with the four central departments holding sway over the PLA's daily and strategic management" in favour of subordinating them to functional components of the CMC.

The latest purges however, as [Joel Wuthnow](#) demonstrates, have differed from earlier versions. The 2012-2015 purges tended to focus on lower-level grade officers and left the PLA's operational commanders in place, while the current round has targeted senior leaders and operational commanders. Here, CSIS has compiled an impressive [dataset](#) that shows that nearly half of those purged since 2023 have been from each of the four services (i.e. PLA, PLA-Navy, PLA-Airforce, and PLA Rocket Force) and the six theatre commands. This lends some weight to the argument that Xi is no longer abiding by the 'conditional compliance' model of Party-military relations by demonstrating his intervention into the operational and 'expert' domain of the military.



With respect to the present ructions at the very top of the PLA we must thus ask two questions: what evidence is there that distinct "factions" exist and that they work against the political authority and interests of the "core leader"?

The question that remains here is to what end?

This leads us to the third analytical entry-point – the role of 'factionalism' in the ongoing purges. The core challenge here, as one of the doyens of Chinese elite politics Frederick Tiewes [noted](#), is not simply aggregating evidence for the existence of 'factions' but 'relating the existence and roles of designated factions to actual political conflict'.

With respect to the present ructions at the very top of the PLA we must thus ask two questions: what evidence is there that distinct "factions" exist and that they work against the political authority and interests of the "core leader"?

The first part of this task concerns thinking about how "factions" may be constituted in the first place, while the second part concerns the question of motivation – i.e. to what purpose(s) does a faction coalesce and act toward?

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, there have been various methods applied by analysts to grapple with these questions. “Factions” within the CCP have over the decades been identified as based on ‘[clientelism](#)’, [institutional-bureaucratic](#) identities and interests, or informal ‘[social networks](#)’. Unsurprisingly, these different conceptualizations of how ‘factions’ are constituted produce different explanations of their role in Chinese politics. As such which analytical perspective one adopts matters to one’s ultimate assessment of the importance of ‘factions’ in the resolution or management of political conflict.

Andrew Nathan’s seminal ‘clientelist’ model [posited](#) that elite politics in the PRC were based on a ‘factional system’ characterised by personalistic, hierarchical and non-ideological relations of convenience between higher status patrons and lower status clients. The implications of this approach for understanding Chinese politics, as Joseph Fewsmith [argues](#), are that factionalism is both pervasive as politics is ‘based on the relations between different individuals at different levels in the system’ and fluid as control between the top and bottom of a faction is ‘attenuated’ as ‘lower levels can often be peeled off by competing personalistic ties, often sweetened by material benefits’.

Institutional-bureaucratic models have, in turn, tended to [suggest](#) that factions are ‘essentially rooted in the institutional structure of policymaking where the interests of the institutions involved clash’ and ‘factional’ leaders ‘act as representatives of the institutions over which they preside’. Finally, social network analysis has [demonstrated](#) how shared place of origin, education, and professional relations may better explain [promotion](#) to the highest levels of the Party-state including the PLA, than meritocratic performance or ideological loyalty alone.



What, then, can each of these approaches tell us about the ongoing purges of the PLA? In brief the picture is mixed.

In the PLA context, [clientelist](#) and [professional](#) relations can be seen in linkages between Xi and members of the so-called “Shaanxi Gang” (Xi’s family ‘princeling’ connections such as CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia) and “Fujian clique” (PLA officers whose careers overlapped with Xi’s time as governor of Fujian between 1999 and 2002 such as CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong) within the top echelons of the PLA. Yet, such connections have apparently not insulated He Weidong, for instance, from Xi’s displeasure.

Institutional-bureaucratic interests, too, provide only partial insights into the latest purges. Victor Shih has [argued](#) that leaders of institutionalised authoritarian regimes – such as those of Leninist nature – have substantial power to “reshuffle the top officers of the military in order to maximise their objective at the moment” and that “one can get a sense of the dictator’s main objective by examining the characteristics of the officers holding senior positions at the moment”.

Shih and a number of [other](#) scholars of the PLA have suggested that the promotion of major figures in the PLA under Xi, on balance, has not been driven by “factional” alignment but rather by Xi’s emphasis on [enhancing](#) the preparedness and warfighting capabilities of the PLA. Following this logic, one could argue that the purging of figures such as He Weidong and Admiral Miao Hua is symptomatic of a [judgement](#) by Xi that these leaders have failed in this core mission.

The recent reorganisation of the PLA too whereby the Strategic Support Force (SSF) has been disestablished and replaced by a new Information Support Force (ISF) directly under Xi’s control can also be seen in this light. This restructuring [suggests](#) that China’s leaders are responding to one of the perceived lessons of the failed Russian invasion of Ukraine by emphasizing the centrality of dominating the information environment for the conduct of joint operations.

What puzzles many observers of this round of purges is that they have targeted men specifically promoted and tied to Xi.

Yet if one notes what [Wu Guoguang](#) has called the “Stalin logic” of Xi’s approach to “elite circulation” this becomes explicable. Not only has Xi, like Stalin, targeted real and imagined opponents within the regime (such as [Zhou Yongkang](#)) but once his position was consolidated he has turned on allies and proteges alike in order to reinforce discipline, demonstrate his authoritative role atop the Party-state hierarchy, and provide scapegoats for enduring governance problems. Each of these elements [converge](#) to make the “further consolidation of power” in the hands of the leader “necessary and more desirable for better governance”.

The ongoing purges suggest the consolidation of the “Stalin logic” and reflect the institutional and ideological dominance of Xi Jinping rather than any weakening of his power. Indeed, [historical precedents](#) within the CCP shows that purges can consolidate authority rather than diminish it. In this sense, Xi through his repeated campaigns against ill-discipline and corruption within the Party-state, including the PLA, has reinforced its Leninist nature [resulting](#) in an increasingly centralised and personalised regime at the highest levels.

For Mao, ‘mixing in sand, throwing stones and digging up the cornerstone’ ultimately resulted in not only an attempted coup by Lin Biao but his anointed successor’s attempted escape, and then death in a plane crash in Mongolia – [creating](#) the greatest crisis of the Maoist period and ultimately discrediting the Cultural Revolution.

Xi, too, has now ‘mixed in sand’, ‘thrown stones’ and ‘dug up the cornerstone’. Whether he will be more successful than Mao in the long run is yet to be determined. But it appears clear that as far as Party-military relations are concerned he [remains](#) ‘large and in charge’.



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The 5th Gulf War: The U.S.-Israeli War on the Islamic Republic of Iran - Part 1: The Historical Background

Ahmed Hashim

On February 28th, 2026, the United States and Israel [launched](#) a war on the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), setting off the 5th Gulf War. The first wave of attacks killed Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had occupied that position since 1989 and several other senior political and military commanders.

The punishing aerial strikes continue well into April, destroying much of the IRI's military infrastructure, including dozens of naval vessels and ballistic missile infrastructure. To the chagrin of U.S. President, Donald Trump, the IRI continued fighting using its ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to attack U.S. and Israeli targets and horizontally escalate by launching strikes on oil and gas infrastructure in the states of the Persian Gulf. It seized control of the Strait of Hormuz through which flows over 20% of the world's oil exports. By the end of March 2026, Trump was struggling for an off-ramp from the war. His 'ally' Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, the suspected prime architect of the war, proved more willing to continue as long as it degrades Iranian military power permanently, this being both a personal and national quest of his and Israel respectively since the 1990s.

Iran's response, while more robust than expected by U.S. analysts engulfing the wider sub-region, has actually [highlighted](#) the "stunning failure" of the IRI's deterrent (bazdaranedgi) and defense (defa) pillars that it had painstakingly built over several decades and whose effectiveness and lethality it had spared no pains to showcase until 2024. These weaknesses and vulnerabilities were brutally [exposed](#) in the 'Twelve Day War' of June 2025, which inexplicably did not seem to merit the moniker of the 4th Gulf War in most analyses, but is so referred to as such here.

The 5th Gulf War (February 2026-present), did not come out of the blue. The fifth Gulf War has a wide-range of underlying causes. The structural and geopolitical dynamics that gave birth to it have been a long time in the making. In the course of less than 50-years the Persian Gulf, the most important economic sub-region of the wider region known as the Middle East, has witnessed five devastating wars. Indeed, the 5th Gulf War's underlying (and precipitating) origins and causes lie exactly in the four previous wars in the sub-region. This is often ignored in analyses that focus on discussing the '[wizardry](#)' of the weapons systems being used, confusion over the strategic goals of the belligerents, and speculations concerning what might come next. Subsequent analysis in the next edition of *Signal* will focus more deeply on the Iran-Israel War of June 2025 and the events that led to it and the current U.S.-Israeli war on Iran.



Two momentous events in the Middle East happened almost half a century ago. In 1979 the Iranian Revolution led to the overthrow of monarch Mohammad Reza Shah after years of political and socioeconomic crises. For the United States, the Shah was a pro-western [bastion](#) of regional stability which he ensured with his impressive hi-tech military and foreign policy activism in the Persian Gulf and wider region.

The Iranian Revolution was composed of a coalition of loosely aligned anti-Shah forces whose hatred of the Shah united them but whose deep mutual suspicions divided them. Islamists united around an irascible cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and adroitly outmaneuvered their erstwhile allies in the revolution by the convenient expedients of exiling or shooting them. By April 1979, they had established the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Mohammad Reza Shah's replacement could not have been any more different. Khomeini castigated the existing international order as one consisting of oppressors – mustakbarin – and oppressed – mustaadhafin. The oppressors consisted of the United States – the 'Great Satan' -- and the west on one side and the 'godless' Soviet bloc on the other side. Assisting the oppressors were their respective minions and 'little satans,' of which conservative and secular Muslim and Arab countries were in the forefront. As for Israel, the biggest of the little satans, it was a 'settler colonial' state imposed by the west in the midst of the Islamic community, or umma to weaken and control it. The 'Third World,' and especially the umma were among the oppressed. Khomeini began developing the strategic concept of resistance – muqavamat – to the oppressors by all means within the capabilities of the IRI at the time.

The second event was the [first Gulf War](#) of 1980-1988 with Iraq. Khomeini called for the 'export of the revolution' as a means to liberate the oppressed and to constrain the freedom of strategic action of the oppressors. While Iran claimed that the 'export of revolution' meant creating an 'ideal' Islamic which would be a source of emulation for the rest of the Muslim world, its neighbours were not convinced. The upsurge in Islamist political activism and violence in Arab countries was blamed on Iran; Khomeini's calls for Muslims to rise up convinced them that Iran was the source of their ills. This was the view of Iraqi strongman, Saddam Hussein, who ill-advisedly attacked Iran in late September 1980, hoping to achieve a quick and decisive victory. The first Gulf War (1980-1988) lasted eight-years and was a destructive, traumatic, and costly war for both belligerents. Iran referred to the first Gulf War as defa moqqadas or 'holy defense' or as jang tahmilli or the 'imposed war'.



Iran learned many strategic and military lessons from this war.

Formerly described as the war of the 'incompetent versus the inept' by the outside world, the war stalemated when Iraq failed to gain a knock-out punch. In 1982, Iran impressively turned the tide and smashed several Iraqi divisions to effectively win the war. The Iranians miscalculated just as Saddam Hussein had in 1980. They invaded Iraq in mid-1982 determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, only to be stymied by surprisingly effective Iraqi defenses bolstered by more sophisticated technology, use of chemical weapons, and increased material and financial support from the region and international community. Exhausted and traumatised, Iran's leader bitterly conceded defeat in August 1988.

Iran learned many strategic and military lessons from this war. Firstly, the world had 'ganged up' against Iran, thereby reinforcing its long-held belief that it was a strategically lonely and isolated entity in the region. It resolved to change that situation. Secondly, it recognised that there were [serious problems](#) with its approach to war with Iraq: command and control failures, poor coordination and inter-service rivalries, inefficient mobilization and logistics, and inability to resolve the practical debate between the relative weights of firepower versus faith in the conduct of the war. The Iraqi threat was removed in 1991 by a U.S.-led coalition to evict Iraq from oil-rich Kuwait which it had invaded in late 1990 to 'recoup' its devastating financial and material losses from the first Gulf War. In an operation called 'Desert Storm' in February 1991, Iraq was defeated in a three-week campaign which eviscerated its huge military. This was followed by a ceasefire which required Iraq to surrender its strategic weaponry and cease work on advanced military technologies. Iran was not directly involved in this war but benefited from the removal of the Iraqi threat.

However, Iran now faced bigger problems. First, it was stunned by the rapid defeat of Iraq. Modern war was something it was definitely not ready for because it lacked the capabilities, sophisticated indigenous defense industries, or access to ready supplies of arms.* Second, the U.S., the ideological enemy was now firmly ensconced in the Persian Gulf, constituting a direct military threat. Third, the U.S., Israel, and the Arab states perceived the IRI as the major 'trouble-maker' in the region now that Saddam Hussein was weakened and contained by severe sanctions. Policy makers and media began to reference Iran's quest for rebuilding its military power, to include the acquisition of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and the 'worrisome' development of an 'asymmetric' naval capability to block the Strait of Hormuz in the case of conflict or war. Iran's support for radical forces in the Middle East became a source of concern to the 'international community,' as did its vehement opposition to Israel.



In return, Iran began to focus on the U.S., Israel and the Arab countries as a national security threat and it responded by seeking to build a robust deterrent capability and warning its detractors that it would respond militarily to any attack on it. In the 1990s, Iranian deterrent capabilities were still quite modest but it was beginning to put together what came to be key pillars of deterrence and defense in the early 21st century. Its build-up and Iran's development of a significant 'asymmetric' set of military capabilities accelerated after the third Gulf War (2003), which will be examined in an analysis in a future *Signal* edition.

* Author's observations from meetings with Iranian security officials and academics in a visit to Tehran in 1993.

Note: This paper is largely based on Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iranian Ways of War: From Cyrus the Great to Qasem Soleimani*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2027) and (New York: Oxford University Press 2027), <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/iranian-ways-of-war/>

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The Iran War after 40 Days: Three Observations

Michael Hatherell

After 40 days of war in Iran a tenuous [ceasefire](#) has been reached. With both the U.S. and Iran claiming victory, Israel continuing to strike Lebanon and a deep chasm between the desired settlement conditions of the combatants, it is unclear whether this ceasefire can be converted into a meaningful end to the war.

The stakes of the war are high, impacting not only those directly involved but also regional order in the Middle East, global energy security and economic stability. This piece offers three observations of the war as it enters its second month, focusing on Iran's effective horizontal escalation strategy, the absence of U.S. grand strategy and the implications for drone warfare.

1. Iran's Effective Horizontal Escalation Strategy

This war has clearly demonstrated the strategic potential of horizontal escalation – particularly in a world still characterised by interdependence. While Iran has also engaged in vertical escalation, it is its ability to escalate [horizontally](#) that has prolonged the war and led to a stronger negotiating position. This horizontal escalation began immediately: in response to the first U.S. and Israeli strikes, Iran expanded the scope of the conflict by targeting 14 different countries, including a number of Gulf states.

Iran's threats and attacks on ships in the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed this key chokepoint to most traffic – a further horizontal escalation option that Iran has historically [threatened](#). This escalates the conflict beyond the immediate geography of the Middle East to impact economies and societies around the world. In an international environment where the raw use of power is becoming more common, the leverage that comes from being able to escalate in this way is significant.

This horizontal escalation is risky and potentially costly for Iran. It will need to exist alongside its Gulf neighbours in the future and faces costs in alienating them. Additionally, in places like Dubai, Iranian expats make up a significant part of the population. Significant attacks on civilian targets are therefore likely to impact Iranians too. Raphael Cohen has [argued](#) that Iran's horizontal escalation strategy may be costly in a region that has a 'long memory'. The strategy also relies on Iran's regime and its people enduring an intense bombing campaign, with senior regime losses, civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. So far Iran's regime has been able to hold on, but that is not guaranteed for the future.

Keeping in mind these risks and costs, Iran's continued escalation reflects the reality that this war is existential for its regime. There is little value for the regime in an end to the conflict without some concessions and at least limited guarantees that the U.S. and Israel will not return to launch strikes again in the near term. If this is not available through peace talks, it is likely the regime is willing to continue to absorb ongoing destruction and economic costs with the hope that its leverage through horizontal escalation will lead to a better strategic position for the future. Iran and the world have already seen that this leverage can work.



This war has clearly demonstrated the impact of horizontal escalation – particularly in a world still characterised by interdependence.



That Iran would engage in horizontal escalation is not surprising - and it should have been apparent to U.S. planners too. What has been notable, however, is how well the strategy has worked. Iran has been able to weather the storm of U.S. and Israeli attacks while continuing to launch its own drone and missile attacks and do so more [accurately](#) over time. Its threats on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz have had the desired effect without needing to directly strike more than a handful of ships.

With the costs of Iran's horizontal escalation growing and the limited strategic options available to the U.S., President Trump engaged in a further escalation of rhetoric. He initially threatened power plants and bridges, before further escalating with the [threat](#) that 'a whole civilisation will die tonight, never to be brought back again'. This genocidal rhetoric was understandably condemned both inside and outside the U.S. Beyond these threats and its strikes on military and infrastructure targets, the U.S. has seemingly had little ability to respond to Iran's horizontal escalation - especially when the U.S. is now so resistant to putting boots on the ground.

Iran's strategy matters because it has left them in a stronger negotiation position. If some of Iran's maximalist negotiation [positions](#) are realised it may even gain more control over the Strait of Hormuz. But the strategy also matters because it increases the credibility of Iran's use of horizontal escalation as leverage in the future to either compel or deter. Decision-makers around the world have seen and experienced exactly how this strategy works in practice and it is credible that Iran would carry it out again if there are compelling strategic reasons. Importantly, this deterrent is likely to be more effective against the U.S. given its global economic position, secure geography and 'America First' politics, but less effective against Israel. This may lead in the future to a complex strategic triangle where Iran attempts to use its leverage against the U.S. (and Gulf states) in order to deter Israeli attacks. That would lead to a very complex and dangerous situation.

2. Effective Grand Strategy Matters

This war also highlights that effective grand strategy matters. President Trump gained a relatively simple strategic outcome in Venezuela. Through a combination of U.S. [military](#) skill and some good fortune, Nicolas Maduro was successfully captured, and the U.S. was able to negotiate with the new President, Delcy Rodriguez, and claim victory. The longer-term value of this mission is [debatable](#), but at the very least it was quick and did not cost the U.S. much.

The success of Venezuela appears to have [emboldened](#) President Trump in his willingness to use U.S. military power in other contexts. Just like in Venezuela, the U.S. administration was able to achieve an early result through the capabilities of its military and intelligence network (and that of Israel). But the death of Ayatollah Khamenei was not followed by the sort of easy outcome that the U.S. was able to achieve in Venezuela - instead the Ayatollah's son has taken over in his place, and the regime appears resilient to outside pressure and internal divides. The regime also appears resistant to giving the U.S. President the type of victory he would like to project.



Grand strategy requires careful consideration of how a state can achieve relative advantage for itself and its allies and partners in the longer-term. It [should](#) be a 'conscious attempt to look beyond the confines of short-term requirements of national defense or day-to-day, immediate foreign policy, and to the pursuit of national interests in a more systematic and synchronized way.'

By contrast, the rhetoric of President Trump and his administration has often appeared focused on very short-term outcomes such as damage to Iran's military capability. In terms of more enduring outcomes, the administration's messaging regarding the place of regime change has been inconsistent – and it has even tried to [claim](#) that regime change has already been achieved when clearly this is not the case. It is also not clear how the war has helped to prevent Iran gaining a nuclear weapon or whether this will be possible in a settlement.

It is not even clear how much the U.S. and Israel have weakened Iran. While many military assets have been destroyed, these can be rebuilt and Iran will likely also further pivot to capabilities that have proven more effective in this conflict, such as drones. Politically, it is entirely possible that this conflict has further entrenched the current Iranian regime – though how it maintains its authority once the war ends remains to be seen. If the ceasefire breaks down and there is again a return to threats against important domestic infrastructure, such as water facilities and power plants, then that could impact the political stability of the regime – but also entails a huge human cost and may lead to Iran becoming a failed state – which in itself may be just as [dangerous](#) to U.S. long-term interests.

It is possible in theory to mount an argument that Trump's erratic nature itself can be beneficial strategically – an extension of his supposed real estate business instincts. But while Trump's rhetoric and threats may have contributed to Iran agreeing to a ceasefire, it is not clear how they can overcome the still wide gap between the negotiating positions of the U.S. and Iran, let alone lead to a better long-term outcome for the U.S. or its allies.

The lack of effective U.S. strategy is even starker when it comes to the damage that is being inflicted on its relationships with allies and partners. The Trump administration has been progressively alienating allies since it came to office, but the strategic importance of the U.S., shared history and the potential of a post-Trump future have arguably limited the responses of European and Indo-Pacific allies. The war in Iran has further emphasised the lack of interest of the current U.S. administration in working together with or even consulting its supposed allies, and shown just how willing it is to blame them for adverse outcomes. Allies [matter](#), even to great powers, and it is unclear how further undermining these relationships is in the long-term strategic interest of the U.S.

In the Middle East, some of President Trump's rhetoric even appears to have overturned the assumptions set out in the Carter Doctrine, as Darren Lim and Stephen Dziedzic have [argued](#). The Carter Doctrine committed the U.S. to preventing any other power from dominating the Persian Gulf region, including the Strait of Hormuz. Some form of this commitment was even present on [page 5](#) of the 2025 Trump National Security Strategy. By arguing that European and Indo-Pacific nations should themselves '[go get your own oil](#)', it is not clear what commitments the U.S. maintains for stability in this region. This will be troubling even for the Gulf states that have largely benefited from their relationship with the Trump Administration.



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This raises the very odd situation that at some point in the future other nations may end up negotiating with Iran – without the U.S. – to establish a ‘new normal’ for the Strait of Hormuz. The implications of such a deal, particularly the response of the U.S. and Israel, are difficult to forecast. Engaging in such a deal would be distasteful for countries with little empathy towards the Iranian regime – including Australia – but may be essential for establishing longer-term economic and energy security. As Sheikh Nawaf bin Mubarak Al-Thani [notes](#), this is something Gulf states have had to do for some time:

Qatar and the rest of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] did not spend the last four and a half decades waiting for Iran to disappear. They acclimated to it. They built policy around it. They built security assumptions around it. They built commercial and diplomatic behaviour around it. That did not mean trust, affection or blindness to the risks posed by Iran and its proxies. It meant something more sober: the Gulf learned to live next to a difficult, ideological, often disruptive neighbour while still building wealthy, globally connected states.

While U.S. allies and partners have felt the impact of this war, the nations that appear to have done well out of this situation are China and Russia. China can position itself as a more stable great power and continue to push for a world that is more friendly to its interest – a [world](#) with a ‘weaker, less moralistic Washington’ that is ‘harder for others to rally around’. It also potential aids China’s [efforts](#) to shift the global oil trade away from the petrodollar arrangement established in the 1970s. Russia has [benefited](#) from the high price of oil and a temporary license to sell its oil – though [Ukrainian](#) attacks on Russian oil facilities are seeking to reduce that benefit. The depletion of U.S. munitions in Iran makes it even less likely they will find their way to Ukraine to support its war effort – and the time it will take for the U.S. to rebuild its stockpiles may yet have future [implications](#) for its readiness should another conflict emerge.

So far, the U.S. administration has failed to present any clear vision for how its current actions connect to a long-term grand strategy. Its actions are not even consistent with its [own](#) 2025 National Security Strategy. Indeed, the war appears to be contributing to the further erosion of the U.S. position in global politics, its relationship with its allies and its relative strength compared to key competitors such as China and Russia. Given this lack of of a strategic vision, it is difficult to see what will guide the U.S. side in the upcoming negotiations (should they take place).

3. The War further Highlights changes in the Character of War

Finally, the war in Iran further demonstrates the way in which drones are shaping the character of war. While Iran has historically been able to threaten the Strait of Hormuz, its ability to do so at a time when its [conventional navy](#) has largely been destroyed is reinforced by the addition of drones to the battlefield.

Drones are reshaping the economics of war. The capabilities of the Iranian Shahed-136 are not particularly remarkable. But it can be [produced](#) for a low cost (US\$20,000-50,000) on a traditional manufacturing line out of largely mass market components. Many of the Interceptors currently being used by the U.S. and its partners in the Gulf cost much more – the Lockheed Martin Patriot PAC-3 missile, for instance, [costs](#) around US\$4 million. This leads to a present situation in the Middle East where in the battle between drones and interceptors, the ‘[economic advantage belongs to the aggressor](#)’. Despite over a month of U.S. bombing with sophisticated weapons and intelligence capabilities, Iran has still been able to maintain its drone and ballistic missile attacks. The U.S., on the other hand, has [invested](#) significant resources and munitions in this war.



Adaptation is a feature of long and less limited wars. Ukraine, for instance, has been combatting Shahed drones for years now, and it has developed small and cheap interceptors such as the Sting, the Bullet and the P1-Sun. The latter two of these interceptors can be 3D printed at dispersed locations. Ukraine's [offer](#) of some of these interceptors to the Gulf has proven to be a meaningful diplomatic gesture.

It is natural that Ukraine has built an industry to develop drone interceptors at scale – but for nations who are not mobilised for a long and existential war like Ukraine the developments in the Middle East further emphasise the importance of understanding and adapting to the new economics of war. Effective responses will not just rely on a single drone type, but will be made up of [drones](#) of different costs, ranges and capabilities, tailored for different purposes. They will also need to deal with the challenges of employing drone technology effectively, such as the strategic and ethical [challenges](#) of autonomy and the impacts of the [contested](#) electromagnetic spectrum, particularly on operator-controlled drones. States will also need to deal with the [potential](#) for non-state actors to use drones to threaten the security of states.

Importantly, both Ukraine and Iran demonstrate that drones are not just a weapon to be deployed for operational advantage. While states in a protracted war need to adapt their operational use of the technology, it is clear that drones have significant strategic potential in limited wars. Iran's ability to threaten a vital strait and the shipping of oil makes its drones capability much more strategically relevant. The use of drones and missiles to threaten Gulf neighbours is damaging to their reputation as stable hubs of commerce and travel – an impact that is much more strategically relevant than the direct damage achieved through these weapons. States will need to consider not just how drones fit into their military force structures, but also where they may be deployed strategically for more limited wars that aim to achieve coercion in the short-term.



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Conclusion

It is difficult to forecast the next steps in this war. There is hope that ceasefire negotiation will lead to a meaningful resolution to the conflict, but the starting positions of the U.S. and Iran appear far apart. In the meantime, U.S. allies and partners will be hoping to see a more restrained form of U.S. statecraft that avoids costly strategic mistakes. The strategic and economic weight of the U.S. makes it very difficult for other states to completely disengage from it as a strategic partner, but the ongoing damage to relationships does matter.

Finally, it is important not to forget the human cost of this conflict. There is of course a direct impact in lives lost and homes destroyed. But it will also continue to be felt through the broader economic impacts around the world, the energy disruption, and the longer-term [consequences](#) for food security. If a meaningful resolution to the conflict is not found, these impacts may stay with us sporadically for some time.

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From the Bookshelf: Sean A. Mirski, *We May Dominate the World: Ambition, Anxiety and the Rise of the American Colossus*, (Public Affairs 2023).

Michael Clarke

The second Trump administration has emphasized the reassertion of American dominance of the Western Hemisphere. Its [National Defense Strategy](#), unilateral actions such as [blowing up](#) alleged 'narco-terrorist' vessels in the Caribbean, and the [abduction](#) of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, have been [framed](#) by the administration as the 'Donroe doctrine' - a necessary update of the [Monroe Doctrine](#) to combat the 21st century threats of Chinese influence and 'narco-terrorism'.

In this contemporary context Mirski's book – a meticulously researched and trenchantly argued account of the United States' rise to regional hegemony from the end of the US Civil War to the opening decades of the 20th century – constitutes a 'must read' for those wishing to understand the deep roots of American power and influence in Central and Latin America.

Mirski's work demonstrates, however, that the 'Donroe Doctrine's' [effort](#) to assert both 'a claim of managerial authority over the political and strategic orientation of an entire region' and 'an operational mandate to shape outcomes within sovereign states', owes less to the be stockinged James Monroe and much more to hirsute post-Civil War figures as Ulyesses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt.

It was in this post-Civil War era that the United States embarked upon a quest for primacy in the Western Hemisphere. Mirski contends here – contra some conventional narratives – that the U.S. was no reluctant or accidental regional hegemon delivered primacy by providence but rather one that consciously pursued that objective out of uncertainty and perceived vulnerability.

In particular, he contends that Washington in the post-civil war era feared encirclement by European empires and the erosion of American sovereignty in an increasingly competitive international system. Driven by these anxieties rather than expansionist zeal, the United States strove and achieved a hemispheric dominance that later informed its rise to global influence.

These anxieties are demonstrated by close historical analysis both of American diplomacy and action in Central and Latin America as well as attention to the evolving narratives of leading American statesman, politicians, diplomats and businessman regarding American interests in the region. Mirski's narrative here provides detailed accounts of key episodes in this process – from American insertion into boundary disputes between Venezuela and the British Empire to underhanded encouragement of Panamanian secession from Colombia to facilitate American influence over what would become the Panama Canal.



Throughout the narrative is imbued with a conceptual clarity primarily informed by realist international relations theory. Here, Mirski frames American behaviour as a response to systemic factors and pressures. But rather than the 'offensive realism' of John Mearsheimer in which systemic anarchy compels power maximisation, and hence drives for regional hegemony, Mirski makes a compelling case that security-seeking behaviour too, driven by anxiety and uncertainty can produce drives for regional hegemony.

The paradox at the heart of Mirski's analysis is that such uncertainty and anxiety co-existed across the period in question with the growth of American material power and industrial capability. The upshot of this argument for contemporary international politics is thus a cautionary one: powerful states are driven as much by insecurity as by strength.

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