Hell and Stone Age: As Iran war rhetoric intensifies, war veteran explains where conflict could go from here

What is so distinctive about Iran's strategy in meeting US-Israel's high-impact campaign? Is the war heading to a 'managed stalemate'? An expert explains.

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Demonstrators hold Iranian flags in Farragut Square, on April 4, in Washington. (AP Photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)

Major conflicts begin either as skirmishes, including grey zone actions, escalating into full-fledged war, or as a planned pre-emptive offensive gradually evolving into a prolonged grinding contest. The ongoing West Asia War might end up in the latter category. In the era of hybrid wars, convincing victory remains elusive.

The story so far

What began as a swift and high-impact campaign by the US and Israel against Iran on February 28 is now in its second month. While the campaign's starting objectives — crippling Iran's

strategic capabilities and decapitating the top leadership — were speedily achieved, the initial gains did not translate into conclusive strategic outcomes. The Iranian regime neither collapsed nor capitulated. Despite intense US-Israeli strikes, Iran holds steadfast.

Iran's strategy of asymmetric warfare entails redundancy, decentralised control and dispersal to engage in a protracted war. Exercising 'strategic patience', Tehran's design is to preserve its own capabilities and exhaust the adversaries, concurrently raising the cost of war.

By establishing control over the Strait of Hormuz, Iran has gained a major strategic advantage, impacting the global energy supply chains, so crucial in shaping the course of war.

Its proxies — Hezbollah in South Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and fringe 'façade' Shia elements in Iraq — entering the fray has resulted in a perilous escalatory vector, opening of multiple fronts, and providing Iran the strategic depth.

Iran conflict in dangerous phase: emerging scenarios

With peace initiatives not making headway, America has undertaken large scale troops build-up in the region, including two amphibious task forces — *USS Tripoli* with 3,500 marines and sailors, and *USS Boxer* with 5,000 amphibious troops, 2,000 paratroopers of 82 Air Borne Division, besides another brigade size team. Trump has suggested seizing Kharg island, Iran's major oil export hub.

Trump's approach to the ongoing war is marked by strategic flexibility and ambiguity, with multiple endgame choices. The low-risk option implies a few weeks of intense strikes, redefining success and claiming victory, without opening the Strait of Hormuz or signing a ceasefire-peace agreement. This would be deemed as a US retreat and undermine its credibility. It also carries risks of Iran retaining leverages of Strait of Hormuz and proxies. The Gulf countries possibly would be left more insecure than before the War.

Alternatively, the US may go in for the high-risk option, marked by intensified escalation and aiming for a strategic knockout. This would require launching special ground operations and secure key assets to open Hormuz militarily, involving amphibious landings and air-borne operations. This could result in heavy casualties, as Iranians apparently are well prepared for such contingencies. Seizing of Iran's nuclear stockpile could also be one of the key objectives. Washington's efforts will be to push Tehran for a forced deal and negotiate settlement on nuclear rollback, limit missile capability and restrain proxies.

A *de facto* option, which is already unfolding, is the state of 'managed stalemate' — with no side having gained a distinct edge so far. While Iran has been weakened substantially, it still retains the capability to retaliate effectively. As the war drags on, it erodes US domestic support and global standing. There is growing strain on the trans-Atlantic alliance as well, given the hesitation on part of America's European allies to join the war, who are balancing security concerns with respective economic interests.

Alongside the fighting on the battlefield, equally consequential is the evolving economic war. Supply chain disruptions, inflationary shocks and collapsing business confidence are now visible across globe. Risk is no longer just of recession but stagflation — where high inflation coexists with stagnating growth.

The diplomatic efforts remain tentative, lacking required coherence to bridge the maximalist positions taken by the belligerents. The conflict is giving way to new alignments. Powers like China and Russia are quietly capitalising on the disrupted environment, securing energy flows and expanding their strategic space.

For India, the conflict has significant implications — energy security, safety of trade routes and well-being of the large diaspora. Diplomatically, India is doing tight rope walking and maintaining a strategic silence. However, being well-placed with all the countries in the region, India can play the role of a pragmatic stabiliser.

The end game?

With Trump now threatening Iranians they will "be living in hell", the war is entering a dangerous phase. While Trump's end game is flexible and adaptive, his preferred course is to go in for a coercive deal, backed by convincing military success. He certainly wants to avoid a costly ground war by keeping multiple 'off ramps' open.

With Iranian leadership repeating proclamations of a befitting response to a US ground offensive, the victory ultimately may be determined by the side that can sustain longer.

No matter what the outcome be, West Asia's geopolitical plates are set for a tectonic shift. Its cascading tremors are bound to fracture the old order, accelerating multipolar recalibrations.

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