

Warning! The Iran War Is Heading Down the Track to Vietnam

written by Col. (res.) Dr. Hanan Shai | 02.09.2026

The United States is wielding enormous power against Iran through cumulative warfare: another strike, another degradation, another punitive blow—each intended gradually to change Tehran’s will. This is the logic that prolonged Vietnam. Washington can control each strike’s intensity, but not how many will be required, how long the war will last, or its terms of termination. Unless the war is moved onto a track of decision, four months may prove only the beginning of a conflict whose outcome America cannot control.

When President Donald Trump was asked whether the continuing strikes on Iran had become the American public’s “new normal,” he replied: “We were in Vietnam for 19 years. We’re here for four months.” He then expressed the campaign’s achievements in percentages, saying that the United States had destroyed 92 percent of Iran’s drone-production capacity and 89 percent of its missile-production capacity.

Chronologically, Trump is right. Strategically, his answer misses the point. The Vietnam War did not last many years because it was already a long war at the outset. It became one because the United States employed immense force without constructing a mechanism capable of producing decision. Long wars always begin as short ones.

Trump’s answer illustrates the problem. Asked about duration, he responded with degradation statistics. But what end state are those percentages supposed to create? Has Iran’s war-making system been disabled? Has it lost the ability to operate effectively? Counting damaged targets is no substitute for answers.

A Washington Post report reinforces the warning. According to a U.S. intelligence assessment led by the CIA, the latest strikes are having no significant effect on the regime’s leadership and are not softening its position. Despite severe damage to military capabilities and the loss of senior officials, the regime continues to display structural stability. The United States and Iran have reached a stalemate—an undefined condition somewhere between peace and war.

This is a red card for the doctrine, not a request for more of the same. Damage is being inflicted, but the intended result is not materializing: the regime's will remains unchanged and its war-making system continues to function.

Graduated Pressure in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the United States followed "graduated pressure." Instead of depriving North Vietnam of the ability to continue the war, Washington increased pressure step by step. Each escalation was meant to raise the cost and persuade Hanoi to negotiate—without triggering a general war with China or the Soviet Union.

The same logic shaped the ground campaign through "search and destroy." American forces sought to locate enemy units and eliminate more fighters and equipment than the enemy could replace. Success was measured by sorties, bombs dropped, targets struck, and enemy casualties.

Yet the United States controlled only the intensity of each blow, not how many would be required before Hanoi changed its will. As long as North Vietnam absorbed the damage and continued fighting, the war had no American-controlled termination mechanism. Graduated pressure also gave the enemy time to disperse, rebuild, and adapt. Short operations thus became a long, costly war.

The Same Logic in Iran

The doctrine being applied in Iran bears a different name, but its logic is almost identical. It relies on denying gains and gradually degrading capabilities: missile and drone systems, military infrastructure, command centers, and freedom of action in particular theaters. Yet these attacks do not disable Iran's war-making system as a whole. Their effects are expected to accumulate until the regime decides that the price is too high and changes its will.

Elbridge Colby's strategy of denial was designed to prevent an adversary—above all China—from rapidly achieving a defined objective and presenting a fait accompli. But denying a specific objective is not the same as deciding the entire war-making system. In Iran, denial has become partial degradation that leaves the enemy able to adapt. Without a mechanism of decision, it becomes cumulative war of uncontrolled duration.

Here, too, each blow is considered separately, its intensity calibrated, and the

door to negotiations kept open. Iran receives time to adapt, alter its methods, and initiate the next round. The United States controls the rungs on the escalation ladder; Iran controls how many rungs must be climbed. Washington determines how much each round will hurt. Tehran determines how many rounds there will be.

Punitive strikes show the same pattern: Iran acts, America punishes, Iran adapts, and Washington launches another wave. Each round inflicts damage but leaves Iran able to initiate the next. Tactically successful, the strikes leave Tehran with the strategic initiative.

Concentrating effort around Hormuz does not necessarily mean concentrating it at the decisive point. Attacks in southern Iran may impair operations in the strait, but massing power in a secondary theater does not disable the nationwide war-making system. Strikes delivered in waves may permit adaptation rather than cause systemic shock.

As Yehoshafat Harkabi explained, a war may begin with limited aims and means yet escape control. Cumulative war looks controlled because every blow is calibrated. But if no one knows which blow will change the enemy's will, there is no control over their number, the war's duration, or its total cost. Tactical control can conceal strategic loss of control.

Captive to Technology

In both wars, technology created an illusion of control. In Vietnam, computing, data processing, and operations research encouraged Robert McNamara's team to manage war through sorties, bombs, targets, and casualties. What could be counted replaced evaluation of strategic results.

The "McNamara fallacy" assumed that favorable metrics proved progress toward victory.

In Iran, precision intelligence, AI, surveillance, and long-range precision fire enable rapid strikes. Yet technology cannot answer the questions of generalship: What will decide the enemy, and how can it be done with available resources?

Launchers, command centers, and factories destroyed have replaced Vietnam's sorties and casualty counts. But technology cannot turn a target list into a

strategy. Control over execution is not control over outcome.

Cumulative Warfare Versus Decision

The doctrine of decision follows the opposite logic. It does not wait for the enemy to be persuaded, discouraged, or drawn toward compromise. His will is not its concern. It deprives him of the ability to operate effectively. Once that ability is lost, he must yield; if he refuses, the systematic dismantling of his capabilities continues until he can no longer function as a war-making system.

The Inchon landing in Korea demonstrated the difference. North Korea concentrated its strength against the Pusan Perimeter, leaving its vital rear less protected. Rather than reinforce the point of enemy strength, Douglas MacArthur landed at Inchon and turned the rear into the main battle space—an operational inversion. Local superiority severed supply and withdrawal routes and collapsed the northern campaign in the South.

Three principles converged: a decision-producing stratagem, concentration at the decisive point, and optimal use of resources to create superiority there. MacArthur did not change the enemy's mind. He made it irrelevant to the outcome.

What Is the Iranian Inchon?

Iran's war-making system comprises two integrated super-systems. The political-economic system includes the regime, economy, financing, legitimacy, and social control. The military-strategic system includes conventional forces, the Revolutionary Guards, missiles and drones, the nuclear program, infrastructure, and proxies.

Generalship must determine which system—or vital interface—is the supreme center of gravity, whose disablement would weaken the other. This is the "Iranian Inchon": not a place for imitating an amphibious landing, but a systemic point where concentrated action would disable the regime's ability to continue the war.

The United States has assembled enormous air, naval, and intelligence power. Israeli participation is not indispensable, but could multiply that power and shorten the war. Sensitivity to casualties need not preclude decision: long-range precision fire can carry the main effort, with limited ground maneuver only where

fire is insufficient.

No Escape from Iran

The United States could ultimately withdraw from Vietnam. The Paris Accords removed its forces, and when South Vietnam collapsed two years later, Washington paid a heavy reputational and strategic price—but left the theater behind.

It cannot leave Iran in the same way. A unilateral withdrawal would leave intact a system capable of striking regional states, American forces, shipping lanes, energy infrastructure, and the global economy. It would allow the regime to recover, rebuild, and choose when to begin the next campaign. Agreements and sanctions cannot substitute for decision while the regime can violate them and restore its power.

An indecisive outcome would also expand China's influence, deepen Tehran's dependence on Beijing, and tie down American forces and resources needed in the Indo-Pacific. An undefeated Iran is not merely a regional threat; it benefits Washington's principal pacing challenge.

The objective must shift from changing the regime's will to denying its ability. This need not mean dismantling Iran or depriving citizens of essential services. It means disabling the mechanisms allowing the regime to control the country, finance its forces, and operate its war-making system. Their collapse may cause the regime to disintegrate. If it survives, it must lack the capacity to impose its will by force.

The CIA assessment is a red card. It warns that the war is heading down the track that led America into Vietnam: another strike, another round of degradation, another punishment—without a mechanism of decision and without control over the war's duration. Four months are not nineteen years. But every nineteen-year war was once four months old.

The track can still be changed. The decisive question is not how many targets have already been destroyed, but what will deprive the Iranian regime of the ability to continue the war—and how the power already assembled in the theater can be concentrated to achieve it.

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