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**Operation Epic Fury
Already a Success:
US Must Exercise
Strategic Restraint to
Avoid Overreach**

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Abstract

Post World War II, the instances of absolute victory are few. The application of military force by US and Israel without, boots on ground, to achieve all the publicly stated aims of Operation Epic Fury, is a difficult possibility. An analysis of the stated aims and objectives of military operations launched by the US and its allies against Iran and its proxies and results achieved thereof, brings to fore that a significant percentage of success has been achieved. A weakened regime of Iran, with important leadership neutralised and economy in disarray, the nuclear enrichment and weaponising program degraded, the ballistic missile systems expended or destroyed and the proxies in retreat is a success with minimal loss of soldiers and military wherewithal. Hence, it will be prudent for the US to claim success and avoid strategic over reach by prolonging the conflict beyond three to four weeks.

Keywords: US-Israel-Iran, Absolute victory rarity, Iran proxies, Economic disruption

US Must Accept that the Concept of Decisive Victory Has Changed

The concept of decisive victory that has long occupied a central place in military thought has changed and the US, by virtue of its past experiences, should be the first to recognise the same. In the early 20th century geo-political environment, wars could ultimately culminate in the destruction of an adversary's military capability and political will. The unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan at the end of the Second World War represented the clearest modern example of such decisive victory even though the same came at equally significant human and economic costs. The strategic environment, post 1945, has altered the character of warfare. Nuclear deterrence— global economic interdependence, and the rising political costs of military occupation have significantly constrained the pursuit of total victory. As a result, modern conflicts increasingly produce limited or ambiguous outcomes rather than decisive strategic conclusions.

Military Force can be an instrument of coercion rather than absolute destruction in the contemporary world— Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and so on are examples wherein, during the World War II, absolute victory was elusive even though massive military budget backed the most powerful forces that were joining the hands. Within this context, public war aims often diverge significantly from achievable operational outcomes.

Governments frequently articulate maximalist objectives such as regime change or total disarmament while conducting military operations designed primarily to degrade specific capabilities or alter regional

power balances.

Operation Epic Fury offers an illustrative example of this dynamics. While the publicly declared objectives included regime change and the destruction of Iran's strategic capabilities, realistic outcomes of the operation appears more consistent with limited strategic objectives and possibilities.

Declared War Aims and Strategic Messaging

Trump, Netanyahu, Hegseth and even Iranian leaders may declare maximalist objectives on public platforms, but as rational practitioners of warfare, they would be cognizant of the limits of military power, particularly when exercised from 1500 kilometres or from another continent. The declared war aims are essential for either side in order to shape the political context of military operations. The political, military and religious leaders are articulating objectives not only to guide strategy but also to mobilise domestic support, reassure allies, and influence adversary decision-making. Strategic communication often involves the deliberate use of maximalist rhetoric. Declaring ambitious objectives can strengthen domestic legitimacy and demonstrate resolve on the international stage.

According to Schelling's theory of coercion, threats and statements made during conflict, function as signals, designed to shape adversary expectations. Military violence itself becomes a form of communication. In this context, the declaration of regime change by Trump is not an abrasiveness or an over reach as a war aim but serves several strategic purposes. For the domestic constituency, such framing allows for legitimacy to apply military force as decisive and morally justified. The protests against the Regime in Iran and the brutal suppression thereafter killing thousands followed by the narrative shaping of repression made the ground work for *jus ad bellum* to go to war. The rhetoric by Iranian leadership of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" further served the purpose to convince the internal and international audience as justification to go to war.

At the international level, such a signalling has allowed for reassuring the allies around the world, particularly regional allies. It was also to deter Iran and their allies in the region. The rhetoric was also with a view to create psychological pressure and uncertainty within the leadership of Iran. It was evidenced in case of Iran wherein the regime went after the protesters brutally suppressing and reinforcing the humanitarian aspect of application of force. The mobilisation and dispersal of the military hardware allowed for the collection of intelligence that were valuable for conducting the strikes. The fear ensured dispersal and hiding of the leadership of Iran thus affecting the command and control of the military forces. Yet, US has to recognise that, in a conflict the adversary also has a vote. The "mosaic defence strategy" that

Operation Epic Fury Already a Success: US Must Exercise Strategic Restraint to Avoid Overreach named the successor by Khamenei much before his death allowed for defiance of military application. The deep tunnels developed to hide and protect the strategic assets including the leadership, and the deployment of the IRGC across 31 provinces, were plan in play to continue the fight against a militarily far superior enemy. Therefore, achieving the stated and rhetorical war aims, in totality, would be a challenge that US should have and must recognise.

Operation Epic Fury: Strategic Context

Operation Epic Fury along with the Operation Lion's Roar of Israel reportedly targeted the strategic infrastructure of Iran, thus reflecting longstanding concerns about the country's nuclear ambitions, missile capabilities, and regional influence.

For decades, Iran's strategic posture has been built around three interrelated pillars. First, was development of nuclear technological capacity; second was expansion of ballistic missile forces and extension of ranges to strike the American continent and cultivation of regional proxy networks. Together, these capabilities have allowed Iran to deter adversaries and project influence across the Middle East. The objectives that can be attributed to Operation Epic Fury reflected efforts to weaken these pillars. Therefore, the publicly articulated goals of the campaign were regime change in Iran, destruction or degradation of nuclear weapons capability and reduction of ballistic missile capability.

From a political perspective, regime change was framed as the emergence of a government that would abandon hostile rhetoric towards Western powers and regional actors such as Israel. Yet, such an outcome would have required far more extensive military intervention than the operational methods reportedly employed.

Structural Constraints on Regime Change

The regime in Iran, as perceived by many, relied on only one individual viz. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But regime in Iran is multi-layered and intertwined from the top leadership to millions of interconnected grassroots religious paramilitaries. Therefore, Iran's layered political system presents formidable obstacles to externally imposed regime change.

Regime change is feasible in authoritarian regimes that depend primarily on a single ruling elite or family or group like that in other regional countries. However, Iran's political structure incorporates multiple overlapping institutions. The authority is distributed among clerical leadership, elected bodies, security organisations, and paramilitary forces. The key institutions includes the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia, which provide the regime with extensive mechanisms for internal surveillance and political control. The political structure is hardened by nearly five decades of religious posture. Going against

an individual or political party or military force is plausible but against the religious authority is fatal— this makes the Iranian regime resilient to external pressure.

Hence, regime change is the most difficult objective to achieve particularly through military force. Rather, displacing through assassinations and political machinations, may look more feasible. The recent case of implanting Yunus by displacing Sheikh Hasina, maybe taken as an aberration, as historical experience demonstrates that overthrowing a government typically requires extensive ground operations, long-term occupation, or internal political collapse. In case of Iran, none is possible and thus there would be a considerable gap between declared war aims and achievable outcomes of Regime change.

Despite all challenges, the change in regime could have been orchestrated. It would mandate large-scale military invasion, internal elite fragmentation and coordinated domestic uprising. None of these conditions were clearly present in the Iranian case. Although, episodes of public protest have occurred periodically, they lacked unified leadership and organisational capability of replacing the existing politico-religious system. These protests were unarmed, disorganised and easily suppressed. Without internal fragmentation or organised opposition, external military pressure alone is unlikely to produce immediate regime change.

And all this would have been war gamed and appreciated by the Trump 2.0 administration. Experiences of Iraq, Afghanistan and other such interventions would have been applied for acknowledging the limits of distant military power. It would be fair to assume that the realistic objective of Operation Epic Fury would shift towards weakening Iran's strategic capabilities rather than removing its government. Without an organising force internally, the likelihood of the population leaning towards a display of patriotism while under attack from an external force would be a realistic appraisal. Once application of external force is removed and the regime is significantly weakened, only then an uprising could probably change. Currently, the regime leadership in terms of Khamenei along with a number of other top political, religious, military and IRGC leadership have been neutralised. The successor to Khamenei, Mojtaba, is reportedly injured and not seen. The IRGC has dissipated in strength and has moved out in what is referred to as mosaic deployments in 31 provinces operating independently without orders. The sanctions and now the control over the oil flow has severely hurt the Regime's capability to exercise effective administration. Repression apart but the administration of a large country that could fracture due to dissonance with a weak government is likely. There are regional and internal forces at play that include the Kurds, Azeris, Baloch and others who could take advantage of the imbroglio of a weakened central leadership.

The crisis or a reasonable paralysis and repressive control of the regime remnants post US withdrawal would leave the region and country in turmoil. The change of regime in full may not be achieved but a regime

Operation Epic Fury Already a Success: US Must Exercise Strategic Restraint to Avoid Overreach that is internally focussed and struggling to exercise and retain control is the next best outcome. The “Death to America and Isarel” may remain a slogan and not threat for a length of time. It would be fair to assume that this would serve the purpose of the US and regional allies’ political objective. Therefore, a critical politico-military objective of Operation Epic Fury can be safely accepted to have been achieved.

Degradation of Nuclear Capabilities

Second focus of Operation Epic Fury was reportedly the disruption of Iran’s nuclear program that was weeks away from weaponising. They had accumulated 440 kgs of uranium enriched to approximately sixty percent purity (Seloom, M. 2026). The effort of 12 days strikes during Operation Rising Lion by Israel that started on 12 June 2025 and Operation Midnight Hammer strikes on 22 June 2025 by USA (Rodgers, J. 2025) on Iranian nuclear infrastructure at Natanz, Isfahan, Fordow and other places, had done significant damage but could delay the nuclear program by few months. While the accepted levels do not constitute weapons-grade material but it had significantly shortened the technological pathway to nuclear weapons.

The threat was not from the nuclear weapons, rather it was from the declared objectives of Iran. “Death to Israel and America” and a fear amongst the regional countries of threat from a nuclear Iran were enough reasons to launch operations for degradation of infrastructure that enabled development of a nuclear program.

Even though strategic bombing campaigns historically demonstrate the difficulty of completely eliminating industrial capabilities, but a sustained damage to critical facilities can impose long-term delays on complex technological programs. Therefore, strikes carried out by the American and Israeli forces were centred around the network of integrated facilities such as enrichment plants, centrifuge manufacturing centres, metallurgy laboratories and warhead design facilities. Disruption of this infrastructure can extend development timelines by many years. Therefore, even if stockpiles of enriched uranium survived military strikes, the destruction of enrichment infrastructure could dramatically delay weaponisation that would allow for diplomacy with degraded or changed regime to change the posture of Iran towards acquiring nuclear weapons or towards its relationship with Israel, US, Saudi Arabia and others in the region.

From this perspective, ‘the operational objective of delaying Iran’s nuclear weapons capability could plausibly be considered achieved even if some enriched material remained intact, buried under mountains or the rubbles or scurried away by the regime before the military operations began’.

Iran’s Ballistic Missile Capability: A Worry for the Region

Ballistic Missiles provide the ability to strike regional adversaries and beyond without deploying conventional forces at great distance up to 2000 to 3000 kilometres and beyond. Their ability to overwhelm air defences with high speeds going even beyond Mach 10 and their capacity to manoeuvre carrying large-pay-

load with potential for nuclear capability offer an asymmetric means of deterrence countries facing technologically superior opponents.

Iran's ballistic missile forces have long constituted a central component of its deterrence strategy, not only to Israel but also to influence Saudi Arabia and other regional countries. It is appreciated that the Saudi Prince prevailed upon Trump to destroy the Ballistic Missile capabilities of Iran. The reason was obvious. The ballistic missile system, being developed, may not reach US shores but had a reach to strike at will Saudi and Israeli territory and infrastructure with very short time to detect and intercept. The same was evident during the ongoing operations when large number of missiles was able to breach the multilayered Air Defence systems of both the countries. As per the rhetoric of the Iranian leadership, Ballistic Missiles were also being developed to hit the American continent and that provided justification for the US to intervene.

During the initial stages of Operation Epic Fury, US precision strikes focussed on the missile infrastructure such as Launch platforms, storage depots, and manufacturing facilities that were destroyed or degraded through precision attacks. The data about the underground network of the missile launch facilities were carefully farmed over a period of time through tech and human intelligence networks and were degraded sufficiently. The declared program of 8000 Ballistic Missiles by 2027 has been dented to few in numbers. As per reports, the number of missiles and launchers have been significantly to be of any operational concern for the region.

While complete wiping-off of missile capability would be extremely difficult, significant degradation would reduce operational effectiveness for several years. Such an outcome would temporarily alter regional deterrence dynamics, reducing the perceived threat faced by states such as Israel and several Gulf monarchies. Nevertheless, missile programs are generally easier to rebuild than nuclear programs and Iran possesses substantial domestic scientific expertise, and external technological cooperation with Russia and China that could accelerate recovery over time. However, the current objective of Operation Epic Fury would have been met.

The Proxy Network: The Perennial Threat Degraded

Iran's regional strategy has relied heavily on partnerships with non-state actors. Organisations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi movement have served as instruments of Iranian influence across the Middle East. These groups provide Iran with strategic depth by allowing it to exert pressure on regional adversaries indirectly.

Operation Epic Fury reportedly coincided with intensified pressure on these networks— leadership losses, military setbacks, and growing regional isolation weakened their operational capacity. A degradation of military and financial networks would reduce Iran's ability to project influence beyond its borders. However,

Operation Epic Fury Already a Success: US Must Exercise Strategic Restraint to Avoid Overreach
proxy networks are often resilient and capable of regeneration. Their long-term effectiveness depends heavily on the broader political conflicts within which they operate.

The Israeli military operation, launched on Gaza, after the horrific attacks of 07 October 2024, has severely degraded the Hamas. They are not decimated but lacks coherence as their leadership has been neutralised multiple times over. The similar case is with Hezbollah, the more powerful military force in the region operating against Israel has lost the leadership in various strikes that include the famous pager attacks and even thereafter. The current administration of Lebanon has not taken kindly to Hezbollah operations and is cracking down upon them. Hezbollah is also not out but severely degraded. Similar is the situation of the Houthis. Either bought off or constrained due to military and intelligence operations, they have not come out openly in support of Iran as yet.

In summary, 'a critical element of force projection in the region, through non-state actors, has been reduced for Iran.. This can be taken as success because till the time, radical ideology persists and the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, completely eliminating the threat of Houthi, Hamas and Hezbollah is nearly impossible'.

The Strait of Hormuz: A Leverage or Responsibility

One of the most significant strategic variables, in any confrontation with Iran, was the potential disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz via which more than one- fifth of the world's oil supply transits. Hence, any sustained disruption would dramatically increase global energy prices and destabilise international markets. But closing the strait would also damage Iran's own economic interests and alienate major energy consumers such as China and India as also regional countries in Gulf that rely on exports of the energy resources.

While the Iranian Navy has been totally decimated by the US forces but the capabilities by Iran to interdict through laying anti -shipping mines, striking through drones and missiles and other means remains. To completely secure Hormuz from any random or isolated attack emanating from Iranian soil or shores is impossible. Trump's call to join the Naval effort to keep the Hormuz has been ignored largely by the NATO allies and other powers who are dependent on Hormuz.

However, the view of the author is that, the responsibility to ensure smooth energy flow is not that of US which is least affected by the closure. It is the responsibility of the Nations who depend on the energy flowing out of Hormuz, on import and export. The reasonable assumption is that, once US withdraws from Hormuz, the oil will flow as Iran has no direct grievance against other countries except US, Israel and maybe Saudi Arabia. Iran itself would need critical financial earnings to support the rebuilding of infrastructure and governance of the country.

Permanent Alteration of Regional Dynamics

The operation also had significant implications for regional political relationships. Iran's interactions with Gulf States have historically combined rivalry with economic interdependence. Informal trade networks and financial channels have often persisted despite political tensions. Military confrontation and the missile and drone targeting of energy and other infrastructure of regional countries by Iran, has disrupted these relationships and deepened mistrust. It has exposed Iran as an unreliable power in the region. The outcomes can be two sided. Either, denial of the economic and financial network will weaken the regime or else Iran will approach future relationship from position of weakness and responsibility. The possibilities of economic incentives and shared security concerns may eventually encourage renewed engagements. This will be a larger goal and outcome of Operation Epic Fury—a long-term peace in the region.

Competing Narratives of Victory

Modern conflicts often produce competing narratives of success. From the perspective of the United States and its partners, Operation Epic Fury could be viewed as successful if it achieved the outcomes of disruption of strategic leadership structures of regime, degradation of nuclear infrastructure, reduction of missile capability and substantive weakening of proxy networks. From the Iranian perspective, however, survival of the remnant of regime and continued resistance to external pressure could be framed as victory. For larger goal of world peace and stability in the region, both narratives can coexist simultaneously. As long as peace and stability endures in the region for a period of time, Operation Epic Fury would be considered as success.

Implications of Strategic Restraint by US

Commencing a war is easy but closing it with gains, even partial, requires strategic maturity. Decisive military victories have become increasingly rare since 1945. One notable exception occurred during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, when India achieved a rapid military victory over Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh. The second one was again by India when the Kargil intrusion (1999) was evicted in a swift military operation and peace was given a chance to mature. India came out stronger after both military operations, as it did not over reach. The similar strategic restraint was experienced in recently launched Operation Sindoor wherein the military strikes were paused within 88 hours of precision strikes across Pakistan once the politico- military objectives were met.

US has to learn from its own experiences of Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq etc. that prolonging military interventions are governed by the laws of diminishing returns. The recent case of the Russia-Ukraine War is the live and ongoing example wherein closures are difficult to achieve.

In case of US, in the current conflict, where ever land borders are not affected, the closure of operation by military is akin to ‘switching off a tap once the bucket is full’. The desire of a complete military victory that can evolve into prolonged instability rather than decisive strategic outcomes is not what Trump should aim for.

Therefore, while the publicly declared objective of regime change may not have been realised, substantial progress towards other strategic goals could justify a declaration of success. These outcomes include significant delay of Iran’s nuclear weapons capability, degradation of ballistic missile infrastructure, weakening of regional proxy networks, disruption of Iranian strategic planning and giving diplomacy an opportunity to succeed when the enemy is severely degraded. The United States, hence, could plausibly terminate the operation while declaring strategic success.

Recommendation towards a Mature Diplomacy based US Strategy towards Iran after Operation Epic Fury

If Operation Epic Fury achieved its immediate operational objectives of ‘degrading Iran’s nuclear infrastructure’, reducing missile capabilities, and weakening its regional proxy networks, the next key strategic question emerges as to how the US should consolidate these gains without becoming trapped in an open-ended conflict with Iran like it did with many others previously. American policy, relying exclusively on economic coercion, to alter Iranian strategic behaviour through sanctions and engagement, has failed over the past five decades. It clearly exposed the limits of economic coercion and diplomatic isolation in the multi-lateral world.

Post Operation Epic Fury, US strategy should consolidate operational gains while avoiding strategic overreach. Plausible recommendations to have a sustainable approach could rest on the following four pillars: ***Strategic Deterrence through a Regional Alliance.*** The first pillar should be the ‘restoration of a credible regional deterrence framework’. Even if Iran’s missile and nuclear infrastructure have been significantly degraded, the country retains substantial technological capacity and institutional resilience to rebuild strategic capabilities. Therefore, the United States and its regional partners must create robust deterrence structures to prevent rapid reconstitution of these capabilities. Such measures could include strengthened regional missile defence systems, continued intelligence surveillance of nuclear facilities. Ensuring freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz should be a regional responsibility. Deterrence in this context, should not necessarily aim to eliminate Iranian capabilities entirely, an unrealistic objective, but rather to raise the costs of strategic reconstruction.

Conditional Diplomatic Engagement. Military operations alone cannot permanently resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. Strategic studies literature consistently emphasises that durable non-proliferation outcomes require diplomatic frameworks supported by verification mechanisms and economic incentives.

Following the degradation of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, the United States could leverage its improved bargaining position to pursue a new diplomatic framework addressing three central issues of limits on uranium enrichment, restrictions on missile development and regional de-escalation commitments. Conditional engagement would allow Washington to test whether Iranian leadership is willing to trade strategic restraint for economic normalisation and security guarantees. Such an approach does not assume goodwill from Tehran; rather, it uses diplomacy as a mechanism for managing long-term risks.

Regional Security Architecture. A third pillar of post-operation strategy should 'involve the strengthening of regional security cooperation among US partners'. Iran's influence has historically relied on exploiting divisions among regional states. Greater coordination among regional actors could significantly reduce Tehran's ability to leverage proxy networks. Key elements of such an architecture might include integrated missile defence networks among Gulf states, enhanced intelligence sharing and coordinated maritime patrols in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Hence, strengthening these partnerships would distribute the burden of regional security while reducing the need for large-scale American military deployments.

Managing the Narrative of Victory. Finally, strategic success depends not only on military outcomes but also on political narratives. Modern conflicts often produce competing claims of victory. Iran may portray survival of the regime as evidence of strategic resilience, while the United States may emphasise on the degradation of Iranian capabilities. Rather than seeking to impose a singular narrative, US policy-makers should recognise that narrative competition is an inevitable feature of contemporary warfare.

The key objective should therefore be to ensure that, the strategic balance resulting from Operation Epic Fury favours regional stability and limits Iran's ability to threaten its neighbours.

If Iran's nuclear program has been delayed, missile infrastructure weakened, and proxy networks disrupted, then the operation may already have achieved its principal strategic objectives. Under such conditions, prolonging military operations could generate diminishing returns while increasing the risk of escalation.

Conclusion: Strategic Restraint After Tactical Success

The broader lesson for the US and the world at large post Operation Epic Fury is that, military force or economic coercion in the contemporary world will rarely produce absolute victories. Instead, military campaigns should be structured to generate windows of strategic opportunity during which

Operation Epic Fury Already a Success: US Must Exercise Strategic Restraint to Avoid Overreach
policymakers must consolidate gains through deterrence, diplomacy, and regional cooperation.

If the United States is successful in delaying Iran's nuclear ambitions, weakens its missile capabilities, and reduces its regional influence, then the operation may represent a strategically meaningful success even without regime change. In this sense, the ultimate measure of victory will not be the destruction of the Iranian state but the creation of a more stable regional balance of power where peace may find roots.

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His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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