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**Winning Without Victory:
A SWOT Analysis of Iran's
Military Strategy**

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Abstract

Over nearly 2,500 years, the land and people of Iran have absorbed existential shocks—including the fall of the Achaemenid Empire under Alexander, the Arab conquest that ended the Sasanian Empire, the Mongol invasions, and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War—that would have erased most civilisations. Empires rose and fell, yet Iranian civilisation endured, defined by a persistent “refusal to disappear.”

Today, despite facing the United States—possessing more than three times Iran's population and unmatched military-economic power—and its ally Israel, with its battle-tested forces and intelligence capabilities, the contest remains asymmetric by conventional metrics. Decades of sanctions, technological isolation, and repeated military confrontations have produced neither decisive victory for the US-Israel axis nor collapse of the Iranian state.

This article examines Iran's resistance strictly through a military lens. Employing a structured SWOT framework, it identifies the internal strengths and weaknesses that shape Iran's defensive posture, alongside the external opportunities and threats it has effectively leveraged. The analysis clarifies how Iran has organised its military approach to avoid defeat and sustain itself against a superior adversary.

Keywords: US-Iran-Iraq, SWOT Analysis, Defence

“We will move with the 35 million. After they have all been martyred, then they can do what they want with Iran. We are not afraid of these threats”

—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (11 Nov, 1979 {Archives, 1979})

Over nearly 2,500 years, the land and people, now called Iran, have absorbed shocks that, otherwise, would have erased most civilisations from the map. Xerxes led the Persian empire at the height of its power in 480 BC. Alexander the Great dismantled it two centuries later. The Arab conquest in 636 CE (Battle of al-Qadisiyyah), ended the Sasanian Empire and altered its religion and culture forever. The Mongol invasions of the 13th century devastated the cities, economy and population. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) lasted eight years and cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Through all of it, the empires came and went, but the civilisation did not fall. What defines this geography across the centuries is their ‘Refusal to Disappear’.

The US, with more than three times of Iran's population and the world's most powerful military and economy, is assumed to hold an overwhelming edge in the balance of power. Its ally—Israel's battle-tested military and its strong intelligence capabilities has made the contest

clearly asymmetric. By conventional metrics of power, this should be an uneven fight with a predictable outcome. Yet, decades into sustained economic and technological sanctions, and with frequent military confrontation, still Iran continues to endure. There is no decisive victory for the US or Israel, nor any collapse of the Iranian state. The expected outcome has not materialised.

This article examines Iran's resistance from a strictly military perspective. Using a structured SWOT framework, the analysis seeks to identify the internal strengths and weaknesses that shape Iran's response so far, as well as the external opportunities and threats that has been leveraged effectively. The aim is to understand how Iran has organised its military approach to avoid defeat and sustain itself against a superior adversary.

Part I: SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- **Terrain.** Iran's geography is its first and most durable strategic asset. The Zagros Mountains along the Western Frontier and the Alborz Mountains in the North form layered defensive barriers that an invading force must negotiate sequentially— ridge line by ridge line. The Zagros alone extend over 1,500 kilometres, rising in places beyond 4,000 metres. The areas on the South, along the Makran Mountains, are vast rocky desert with limited habitation. During the Iran–Iraq War, Iraqi offensives were stalled in the Zagros belt due to terrain constraints. The military imperatives are: -
 - Parallel ridge systems force the attacker to secure successive passes intervening valleys canalise movement and act as natural killing grounds.
 - Narrow approaches and defiles restrict the deployment and manoeuvre of mechanised and armoured columns, negating mass and speed.
 - The hard granite based mountainous terrain degrades the effectiveness of surveillance, targeting and missiles.

Figure 1: Iran Physical Map



Source: Adventure Iran

- **Missile and Drone Capability.** Iran has invested heavily in missile and unmanned systems as a central component of its military posture. A key feature is domestic production, which ensures continuity under sanctions and allows scale.
- **Missile Capabilities.** Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is assessed to be the largest in Middle East. Its range covers Israel, US bases across the Gulf, and much of the broader region. While there are no official figures, estimates suggest an inventory of around 2,500 to 3,000 missiles (Pietromarchi, 2026). This includes short- range ballistic missiles with ranges of 300 to 1,000 km and medium-range ballistic missiles with ranges of 1,000 to 3,000 km.
- **Drone Capabilities.** Alongside ballistic missiles, Iran has developed a substantial inventory of cruise missiles and loitering munitions, including the HESA Shahed 136 series, which has demonstrated operational effectiveness in multiple theatres (Bondar, 2026). These systems are domestically produced, making them sanction-resistant and scalable. The Shahed drones and its variants have been employed by Russia against Ukraine. In 2025, Moscow deployed 54,000 Shahed-type drones, renamed as Geran-3, against the country (MacAlpine, 2026). The CSIS data shows Iran's drone arsenal as:-

Table 1: Iran's Drone Arsenal

System	Estimated Range	Speed	Payload
Shahed-136 / Geran-2	1,000–2,500 km	180–185 km/h	30–50 kg HE warhead
Arash-2(reported)	Up to ~2,000 km	Not publicly confirmed	Larger warhead than Shahed-series
System	Estimated Range	Speed	Payload

Shahed-107	Not publicly confirmed	Not publicly confirmed	Likely smaller than Shahed-136
Shahed-238	Not consistently reported	Significantly faster than Shahed-136	Not publicly confirmed
Hadid-110 (Dalahu)	Not publicly confirmed	510 km/h (reported)	30 kg

Source: Compiled by Author

- **The Strait of Hormuz.** Iran sits astride the most consequential energy chokepoint on earth— the Strait of Hormuz. It is the only major commercial artery on earth named after a god. The name derives from Hormoz, the Middle Persian rendering of Ahura Mazda —the Zoroastrian deity of wisdom, light, and cosmic order (Al-Hashemi, 2026). Iran's position along the Northern coastline allows it to threaten, regulate or selectively disrupt shipping, thereby imposing global costs without engaging in full-scale war.

Figure 2: The Strait of Hormuz



Source: Al Jazeera

The Strait of Hormuz is a vital 104-mile-long (167 km) maritime chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, with a narrowest width of only 24 miles (39 km).

An estimated 30,000 vessels pass through this strait per year. As of early 2026, it facilitates the daily transit of roughly 20% of the world's total oil consumption and over 20% of global Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) shipments, making it indispensable to global economic stability (Agency, 2026).

Nearly 45 % of global sulphur exports and over 30 % of urea trade passes through the Strait. Key importers affected includes India, which sources over 40% of its fertilizers from the region, and Brazil, which relies on these shipments (Shamim, 2026).

The Strait of Hormuz is also a major thoroughfare for food supplies for Gulf countries, which are highly dependent on food imports.

Ideological Force behind the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is not a conventional force. Its mandate is to safeguard the Islamic system. It controls the missile programme, the Quds Force for operations abroad, and the Basij for

internal mobilisation. What provides the ideological glue:

- ***Shia Ideological Identity.*** The IRGC, though a military organisation, is primarily a revolutionary vanguard. It is created to save the 'Revolution' and survival of the Islamic Republic's clerical regime. Its members believe that they are defending not just a state but a Shia cause. It serves directly under the command of the Supreme Leader— Khamenei (Security, 2026).
- ***Velayat-e Faqih.*** The doctrine of guardianship of the Islamic jurist binds the force to the sole authority of Ali Khamenei. Obedience is in the doctrine and institutionalised.
- ***Iran–Iraq War Memory.*** The IRGC actively participated in the eight-year Iran- Iraq war where Tehran suffered massive casualties and destruction. That shared trauma and survival is the institutional glue.
- ***Economic Entrenchment.*** Apart from ideological inspiration, the economy amplifies the motivation of IRGC. The Revolutionary force has significant stakes across sectors such as construction, energy, and telecommunications (reports indicate 35- 40%), giving it both ideological and material incentives to preserve the system (Soleimani, 2026).
- ***The Axis of Resistance.*** Iran and its allied groups in the West Asia forms a loose coalition often collectively referred to as the 'Axis of Resistance'. The "Axis" consists of Shia Islamist militant organisations, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Islamic Resistance and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in Iraq, various Palestinian factions in Gaza (Hamas) and the Houthis in Yemen (Alex Vatanka and Fadi Nicholas Nassa, 2025). The roots of the 'axis of resistance' go back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which paved the way for radical Shia Muslim clerics to come to power.

This axis serves two functions simultaneously. **First**, it allows Iran to impose costs on its adversaries at geographic distance, without direct attribution or formal escalation.

Second, it forces its adversaries to maintain pressure across multiple fronts at once, dispersing resources and attention.

- ***Strategic Backing from Russia and China.*** Russia and China have both deepened economic and military ties with Tehran, providing relief from the full weight of Western sanctions. These powers supported Tehran by supplying technology that Iran cannot source elsewhere and sustaining its challenged economy in exchange of much needed oil and gas. This serves both the parties as both Moscow and Beijing aim to counter US influence in the region with Iran in front. For Tehran, these two powers have provided the oxygen to survive and flourish.

Weakness

- ***Weak Conventional Air and Naval Power***

Before the launch of Operation Epic Fury on 28 February 2026 the IR-IAF was appreciated to have roughly 250 to 300 aircraft. In practice, only a portion of these aircraft were combat-ready, due to maintenance challenges and spare parts shortages. Iran's air force relies largely on pre-1979 platforms such as F-4 Phantom II, F-5 Tiger II and F-14 Tomcat, with limited upgrades and availability (Kass, 2026).

The Iranian Navy (IR-IN) comprises over 18,500 personnel and more than 100 vessels, including ships and submarines. Iran has no blue-water navy capable of sustained operations. Iran's navy ranks 37th out of 145 naval forces worldwide (Arabic, 2025). Naval capability is oriented towards coastal defence and asymmetric warfare, with limited blue-water projection compared to the US Navy.

- ***Insufficient Air Defence Capability.*** The failure of Iran's air defence system, during the June 2025 war with Israel, was surprising to many experts. Iran acquired four batteries of the Russian S-300 system from 2016 onwards, deploying them to protect its most sensitive nuclear and military sites. Those batteries proved insufficient. Iran's air defence network has consistently suffered from poor integration between its various systems, leaving seams that a sophisticated adversary can exploit (Lair, 2025).
- ***Economic Vulnerability.*** Four decades of sanctions have affected Iran's formal economy in ways that had direct impact on its military capability development. The inability to access international financial systems, import advanced technology or attract foreign investment has kept Iran's defence industrial base dependent on reverse engineering, domestic improvisation, and whatever can be sourced through intermediaries. As of early 2026, Iran is experiencing its deepest economic crisis in modern history, characterised by rampant inflation (over 40–50%), severe currency depreciation with the rial falling below 1.4 million per US dollar, and high food prices. The GDP is slowed to 3.7% in 2024/25, with projected contractions or low growth in 2026 (Behrang Tajdin and Ghoncheh Habibiadzad, 2026).

Opportunities

Vulnerable Installations and Infrastructure in the Gulf

- ***Oil and Gas Infrastructure.*** The Gulf region has a vast share of global oil and natural gas infrastructure. Roughly 30% of global oil production facilities are located along astride the Persian Gulf. These facilities high end infrastructures that have been developed with massive funding. Critical facilities such as Abqaiq oil processing

facility and Ras Tanura terminals sit at the centre of this network and have already demonstrated vulnerability, as seen in the 2019 Abqaiq–Khurais attack by Iran.

- **US Military Bases.** The US has military installations in the Gulf nations as a guarantee for security but present a parallel vulnerability. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Al- Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, and Naval Support Activity in Bahrain are among the most significant American military facilities in the world and all sit within comfortable range of Iran's ballistic missile inventory.
- **Subsea Communication Cables.** Major undersea internet cables that carry global internet traffic passes through the Persian Gulf and through the Hormuz. Any damage to them could trigger internet outages and hit financial systems across countries, including in India. These forms the backbone of global data flow and are inherently difficult to defend, making them attractive targets for disruption. In a conflict wherein Iran is already operating asymmetrically, these cables represent a persistent vulnerability that its adversaries cannot easily harden (Singh, 2026).
- **Digital and Economic Infrastructure.** A number of high value IT and AI companies have established infrastructure worth billions in the Gulf Region— 18Tech companies from the US including Google, Apple, Oracle, Nvidia conduct operations from this region (Nicol-Schwarz, 2026). These are vulnerable targets for Iran's ballistic missiles and drones.

Threats

- **Decapitation Strikes Against Leadership, Scientists and Commanders.** Iran fears systematic targeting of senior political leadership, IRGC commanders and nuclear scientists to induce paralysis. The January 2020 killing of IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in a US drone strike in Baghdad removed the single most important architect of Iran's regional proxy strategy (Doucet, 2020). In the first week of the ongoing conflict itself, US-Israel removed almost the entire top rung leadership of Iran.
- **Air Dominance.** Iran has no credible answer to the combined airpower of the US and Israel. It faces sustained air superiority of US/Israel enabling precision strikes, ISR overmatch and freedom to conduct deep interdiction across its territory with minimal resistance. For Iran, this is a structural condition that its adversaries have consistently exploited and that sanctions prevent Iran from addressing through procurement.
- **Punitive Strikes on Nuclear, Military and Civil Infrastructure.** The most severe

threat Iran faces is a high-intensity campaign against its critical infrastructure—civil and military. Iran's nuclear programme represents decades of scientific development and enormous financial cost. All these are extremely vulnerable to a campaign that systematically works to degrade it by precision strikes. That is the threat Iran cannot fully deter and cannot easily recover from. Till here

Part II: SWOT Strategies

Strength Opportunity Strategy (Use Strengths to Capitalise on Opportunities)

Missile Strikes on Vulnerable Bases and Infrastructure. Iran is waging its missile campaign against Israel and the Gulf states under conditions that would normally incapacitate a modern military. Iran has demonstrated both intent and capability by targeting Al Udeid (Qatar), Al Dhafra (UAE), Al Salem Air Base (Kuwait), the US Fifth Fleet base (Bahrain) and critical Gulf energy infrastructure. Recent operations indicate a well-coordinated, missile and drone attacks across the region, affecting airbases, radar systems, oil and gas infrastructures, airports and other select civilian-linked infrastructure.

Drone Warfare. Iran's use of loitering munitions, particularly the Shahed-136, has emerged as a defining feature of this conflict. These systems are slow, relatively simple (comprising a piston engine propeller) and inexpensive, often described as the "poor man's cruise missile." Yet their operational value lies in scale and persistence, not precision. With ranges extending up to 2,000–2,500 km and costs between \$20,000 and \$50,000 (Butts, 2026), they enable Iran to sustain continuous pressure across a wide geographic arc.

Impose Disproportionate and Unsustainable Cost. The U.S. Department of Defence (DOD) has reportedly informed Congress that the first six days (D+6) of the war cost \$12.7 billion (Park, 2026). Of this value, the cost of munitions was \$11.3 billion. By this rate, the cost of war to the US is roughly around \$2 billion USD per day (Park, 2026). As on 05 April, at this rate, by Day 38, cumulative costs are estimated at \$70–75 billion.

Indicative losses and damage to high-value platforms and systems reported till 05 Apr 2026 are :

Table 2: Indicative Losses

Platform/Equipment	Numbers	Cost Per Unit (million)	Total
AN/FPS-132 (Qatar)	01	\$1100	\$1100
AN-TPY-2 (Jordan/UAE)	02	\$485	\$970
F-35 Lightning-II (damaged)	01	\$110	\$110
F-15E Strike Eagle	04	\$90	\$360
A-10 Thunderbolt	01	\$19	\$19
C-130 Commando II	02	\$100	\$200
E-3 Sentry AWACS	01	\$700	\$700
K-135 Tanker	08	\$164	\$1312
HH-60W/M Heprts	03	\$20	\$60
CH-47 Chinook	02	\$50	\$100
MQ-9 Reapers	17	\$41	\$698
Light Heprts	04	\$5	\$20
Total			\$5649

Source: Compiled by Author

Nature of Expenditure: Damage vs Defence Consumption. A critical distinction must be made between losses suffered and the cost of sustaining combat operations. While indicative damage to U.S. platforms and systems over 38 days is estimated at approximately \$5.6 billion, this represents only the visible, capital loss component of the war. In contrast, the cost of munitions and defensive engagements is significantly higher. Of the \$12.7 billion spent in the first six days, approximately \$11.3 billion was attributable to munitions expenditure alone (Park, 2026). This reveals the central dynamic of the conflict.

The Cost Mathematics. Iran has been incessantly attacking US Bases in Gulf, Israel and the Gulf infrastructure. The underlying motive of these assaults is making the cost of confronting Iran higher than the benefit of defeating it.

Air and Missile Defence Architecture. US and allied forces rely on a layered air defence network comprising: -

- Patriot PAC-3 for terminal ballistic missile and cruise missile interception. Cost per unit is \$4 million (Desk, 2025).
- THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) for high-altitude ballistic missile

interception. Cost per unit is \$12 million (Gerry Doyle and Golnar Motevalli, 2026).

- Arrow missile system is used by Israeli Defence Forces for exo- atmospheric interception of medium-range ballistic threats. Unit cost is \$3 million.

Iran's Engagement Arithmetic. The arithmetic at the centre of Iran's strategy is simple and brutal. US is using THAAD and Patriot PAC-3, while Israel uses Arrow interceptor missiles against Iran's missiles and drones. Iran has been primarily firing SRBMs in the Gulf region (range up to 500km). Its ally viz. the Hezbollah is firing rockets and drones in Israel territory. The table below captures the financial asymmetry at the heart of every engagement between Iranian offensive systems and Western Air Defence: -

Table 3: Financial Asymmetry

System / Engagement	Iran Cost (Million USD)	Defender Cost (Million USD)	Cost Ratio
MRBM vs Arrow	1.5-6	2	1: 1.5 /0.33
Shahed 136 vs Arrow	0.02	2	1: 100/40
Rockets Vs Arrow	0.05	2	1:40
SRBM vs THAAD	1	12	1: 12
SRBM vs Patriot PAC-3	1	4	1:4
Shahed 136 vs Patriot PAC-3	0.02	4	1: 200

Source: Compiled by Author

Ratios. The cost ratio between attacker and defender ranges from approximately 1:4 at the lower end to over 1:200 against the cheap drones. Across thousands of engagements, that ratio is not a tactical inconvenience. So, for every Iranian drone/missile fired US/Allied forces are spending the zone of 4-200 times. This arithmetic is impacting the cost of war. Iran's strategy is therefore built around the possibility that the stronger side may eventually find the price of continued escalation too high.

Consumption vs Expenditure. Iranian tactics has forced US and allied air defence systems to engage at scale, often firing multiple interceptors per incoming threat to ensure kill probability. This has led to near-indiscriminate defensive expenditure, with the second order effect of the rate of consumption far exceeding the production. The data below (compiled from DoD disclosures, CSIS estimates and open-source reporting, 2025–26) highlights this phenomena:-

Table 4: Consumption v/s Expenditure

System	Production Per Year	Expended in Conflict	Gap
THAAD interceptors	96	>400	4+ years
Patriot PAC-3	500-600	>2,500	4-5 years
Arrow missile system	Limited (classified/low rate)	>850	Severe strain on inventory
Tomahawk missile	190	>900	5+ years

Source: Compiled by Author

Shahed Proliferation Loop. Iran has also leveraged external conflicts to refine and scale its capabilities. Iran fought a proxy technology war wherein its cheap drones were used against Ukraine. The operations gave valuable inputs for subsequent evolution of this drone technology. Gulf nations, ironically, had to approach Ukraine for counter-drone expertise. The logic flows like this:-

- Iran supplied Shahed drones to Russia
- Russia mass-deployed them in Ukraine (54,000 in 2025 alone).
- Ukraine, NATO, and US studied them and shot them down to generate data on radar signature, vulnerabilities, interception costs.
- Iran absorbed those lessons and produced improved variants. Those improved drones are now being used against US bases and Gulf infrastructure by Iran.

Activation of Axis of Resistance. Iran has tasked its Axis of Resistance partners to help it thwart the assault by the militarily superior forces of the US and Israel.

Hezbollah fires into Israel from the North. Houthis threaten shipping and strike from Yemen. PMF pressures US forces in Iraq. Hamas ties down Israeli ground forces in Gaza. Iran sits in the centre, coordinating without formally fighting.

Controlling Yemeni territory along the Red Sea and another regional chokepoint of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait where the Houthi movement is best positioned among Iran's allies to add strategic weight to Iran's war effort (Intelbrief, 2026).

Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab. The Twin Chokepoint Lever. The Bab al-Mandab, under effective Houthi pressure, controls the Southern Red Sea entry point handling roughly 12% of global trade. Together, the Strait of Hormuz along with Bab-al-Mandab place nearly 32% (20% +12%) of global oil and gas flows under Iran's coercive reach. So, before the war, Iran was controlling only 4-5% of world's oil and gas, however after 28 Feb, Iran can effectively disrupt 32% or one-third of world's oil and gas.

Strength Threat Strategy (Use Strengths to Counter Threats)

Mosaic Doctrine. The Mosaic Doctrine is the idea is to organise the state's defensive structure into multiple regional and semi-independent layers (31 mosaics) instead of concentrating power in a single command chain that could be paralysed by a decapitation strike.

Architecture. Under this model, the IRGC, the Basij, regular army units, missile forces, naval assets and local command structures form parts of a distributed system. If one part is hit, others keep functioning. If senior leaders are killed, the chain does not collapse. If communications are severed, local units still retain the authority and capacity to act.

Architect. The doctrine was operationalised within the IRGC Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari is a former military officer who was the commander-in- chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from 2007 to 2019. The doctrine was given its ideological framing by strategist Hassan Abbasi.

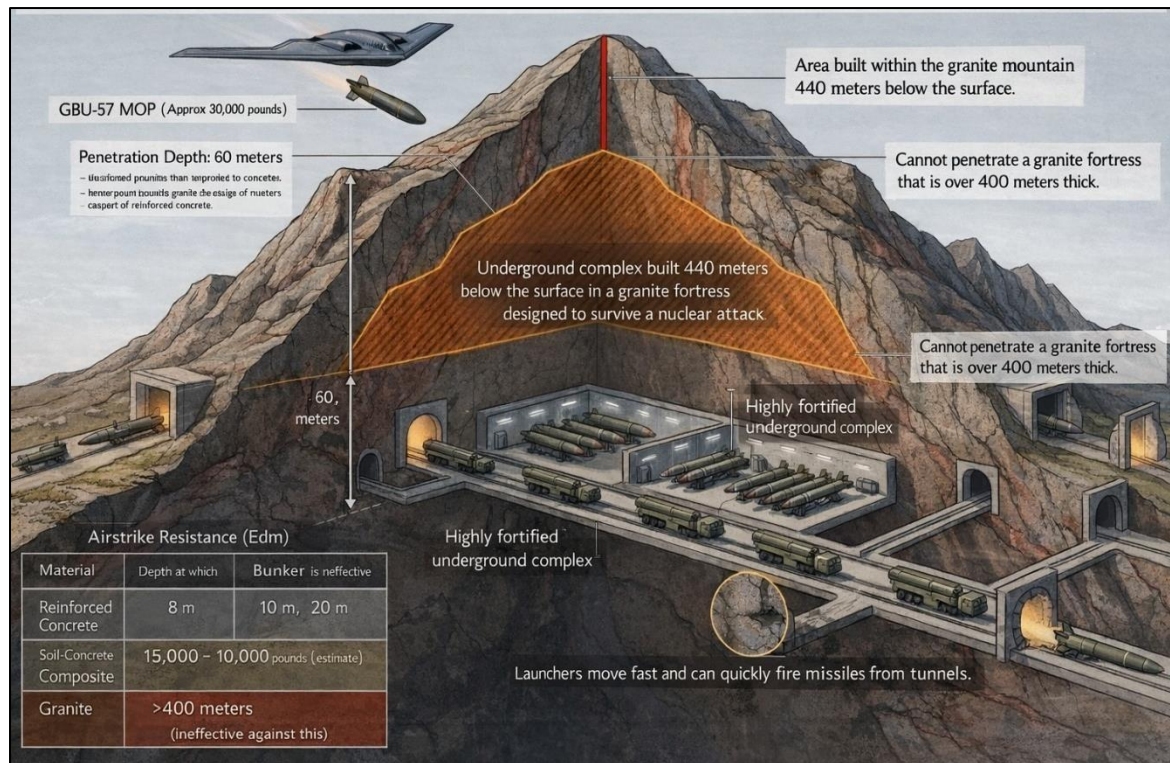
Implications

Iran correctly appreciated creation of vacuum after assassination of its top leadership, thereby leading to chaos and breakdown of government. It was designed for a war in which commanders might be killed, communications severed, infrastructure hit and central authority strained, but in which the state, the armed forces and the wider security system would continue functioning (Ibrahim, 2026).

Tunnel Infrastructure and Hardened Sites. Reports suggest that the US and Israel have struck more than 21,000 Iranian military targets with Israel claiming to have “neutralised” 335, or 70%, of Iran's missile launchers (Dey, 2026). However, a resilient Iran continues to launch salvos of missiles and drones. Analyst opine that first plausible reason for this is vast stockpile of missiles with Iran, and second that the Iranian missiles are stored in the IRGC's impregnable underground bases called “Missile Cities”, which can't be destroyed even by the most powerful US bunker buster bombs, especially the GBU-57. The bases, hidden 50-500 metres beneath mountains, are used to assemble missiles, store and fire them from silos. The missiles are

mobile and combat-ready via a sophisticated rail network.

Figure 3: Iran's Tunnel Defences



Source: Aris, 2026

Weakness-Opportunity Strategy (Overcome Weaknesses by Leveraging Opportunities)

Economic Sanctions and Weak Conventional Airforce. Iran's structural weaknesses, particularly economic sanctions and the absence of credible conventional air power, are being partially offset through asymmetric opportunities.

Control over key maritime chokepoints such as Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab allows Iran to influence global energy flows, indirectly easing economic pressure through rising oil prices. The use of low-cost UAVs and loitering munitions substitutes for expensive and vulnerable air assets, enabling sustained operational reach without parity in air power.

Iran externalises combat through its network of proxies, shifting the battlespace away from its own territory while maintaining strategic pressure on adversaries. However, these measures do not resolve underlying vulnerabilities. The approach therefore represents partial mitigation.

Weakness-Threat Strategy (Minimise Weaknesses and Avoid Threats)

Acceptance of Destruction. Iran is following the philosophy of “Endurance as Strategy”. The Mosaic Doctrine ensures that decapitation, communications interdiction, and infrastructure strikes do not produce systemic collapse. Local commanders retain autonomous authority. The machine keeps running even as parts of it are destroyed. Casualties can't be avoided and they are the accepted price of outlasting a superior adversary. Survival is the victory.

Essence of Iran's Way of War

Geography. Iran weaponised geographical advantage and has been its strongest leverage in the war. Gulf bases and oil assets became exposed targets. Hormuz and Bab al- Mandab, controlling nearly 32% of global oil and gas flows, became instruments of coercion.

Capability Choice. Iran invested in disruptive, low-cost systems over traditional high-end platforms. The use of UAVs and loitering munitions against conventional air defence and high-value assets reflects a deliberate shift towards a different model of fighting that is disruptive and works a deliberate alignment of its strengths against adversary vulnerabilities.

Cost Asymmetry. Iran identified early that the real battlefield was economic, not kinetic. A \$20,000 Shahed-136 triggering a \$4 million Patriot intercept, repeated across hundreds of engagements, shifts the game from Iran's survivability to the adversary's sustainability. At \$2 billion per day and \$70-75 billion by Day 38, the cost arithmetic was working in Iran's favour. Cheap mass, sustained over time, became the central strategy.

Survivability. Iran prioritised protection of its most critical assets, particularly missiles and nuclear infrastructure. The 'Missile Cities' buried 50-500 metres beneath mountains, mobile rail-based launch systems and the Mosaic Doctrine's 31 distributed command layers ensured that US strikes were ineffective. The system was designed to absorb attacks and still continue functioning.

Externalisation. Iran pushed conflict outward. Hezbollah, Houthis, PMF and Hamas expanded the battlespace, diverted direct pressure on Iranian territory and forced the adversary to fight on multiple fronts simultaneously.

Overall Approach. Iran shaped the war before it reacted to it. Facing a conventionally superior adversary, it forced the adversary to fight on the ground of Iranian choice. It defined the

battlespace, avoided the adversary's strengths and imposed a strategy where US conventional strengths could not be fully brought to bear. It was a simple, coherent, pre-designed architecture built around Iran's strengths and the adversary's vulnerabilities.

Implications for India (Northern Front)

Self-Belief. The first requirement is conviction that any adversary can be defeated. The difference lies in cost, time and method. A stronger opponent is not invincible. If the fight is structured well, costs can be imposed to a level where continued operations become unsustainable. Strategy begins with this clarity. Gen Sagat's operation of 1967 was against a strong enemy, but his self-belief and leadership ensured Indian forces held ground, adversary suffered casualties and Nathu-La pass is with us.

Independent Thinking. Doctrine must emerge from India's own threat perceptions, geography and constraints. Imported frameworks, when applied without critical examination, may result into blunder. The starting point is clarity of one's own problem. Not imitation of another's solution.

Adversary-Specific Capability Development. Capability development must be driven by how the adversary fights, not by mirror-imaging. China's combined arms brigades are dense, vehicle-heavy formations with 400 to 500 armoured and support vehicles. Indian strategy may be to raise formations on these lines and alternatively look for vulnerabilities with the adversary.

In mountains, this density becomes vulnerability. Movement is canalised through narrow passes and limited axes. Logistics columns stretch and become exposed. These conditions create predictable and lucrative target sets. Chokepoints, approach corridors and concentrated logistics chains can be targeted with precision fires, loitering munitions, swarm drones and pre-surveyed Artillery kill zones can be structured to exploit this density.

The aim is not to match numbers, but to impose cost by targeting concentration(vulnerability). The larger principle is to analyse the adversary strength in a context-dependent scenario. In constrained terrain, mass becomes targetability. Every threat carries within it an opportunity.

Terrain as a Weapon. Terrain is an asset if used creatively. High altitude should not be treated as a defensive disadvantage, but as a leverage. Mountains eat troops and the efficacy of fires

reduces. The loose soil of the Himalayas can be a weapon with landslides, choke points, time factor, logistics and health of troops. Ingenuity can turn it into the strongest leverage.

Survivability. Protection of critical assets is non-negotiable. Fixed, visible and predictable design and plan of infrastructure invites targeting. Survivability must be engineered through dispersal, hardening, redundancy, deception and other ingenuity. Systems should be built to absorb disruption and continue functioning without central collapse. An autonomous mosaic-based doctrine can be considered to ensure continuity in operations.

Cost Imposition. Conflict must be framed in terms of cost and not battlefield outcomes alone. Tactical success is insufficient if the adversary can sustain the fight indefinitely. Low- cost, high-volume systems, when employed at scale, can impose disproportionate economic and operational burden. Victory lies in making continued operations unaffordable.

Disruptive Technology and Asymmetry. Disruptive use is about pitching cheap systems against high-value assets. The core idea is to use low-cost drones and loitering munitions against armour, air defence, logistics, and command nodes. Force the adversary to spend far more to defend than you spend to attack.

Maritime Cost Imposition. The Malacca Dimension. Unlike Iran's direct geographic command over Hormuz, India does not sit astride Malacca. The dynamics are not analogous and assuming parallels will be oversimplifying. Still, selective asymmetric leverage remains available. The Indian Ocean is a need for China and is India's backyard. Submarines, in particular, offer a credible instrument of cost imposition without requiring physical control of a chokepoint.

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