



THE NEW MIDDLE EAST: REALITY, ILLUSION, OR STRATEGIC MIRAGE

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Abstract

The notion of a "New Middle East" has repeatedly emerged following major regional conflicts, military interventions, and geopolitical realignments. Most recently, the confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran has revived claims that the region is undergoing a fundamental strategic transformation. This paper critically examines whether the ongoing conflict represents the birth of a genuinely new regional order; merely creates the illusion of transformation, or constitutes a strategic mirage. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of coercive diplomacy, offensive realism, balance of threat, and economic interdependence theory, the paper distinguishes between military success and strategic transformation. It argues that while military operations may alter the regional balance of power temporarily and degrade an adversary's capabilities, they do not necessarily produce a durable political order or reshape the strategic behaviour of regional actors. The persistence of ideological rivalries, sectarian divisions, competing security interests, and the absence of an inclusive regional security architecture continue to constrain the emergence of a stable Middle Eastern order. The study concludes that unless changes in the regional balance of power are accompanied by political accommodation, institutional development, and a shared security framework among the principal regional actors, the vision of a "New Middle East" is likely to remain more a strategic aspiration and strategic mirage than an enduring geopolitical reality.

Keywords: Middle East, Iran, regional order, realism, coercive diplomacy, balance of power, strategic mirage, regional security, geopolitical transformation.

Introduction

Mirage is more than an illusion. Whereas an illusion is something that appears real but is not, a mirage in strategic terms is an attractive but unattainable objective that draws policymakers into making costly decisions. It is also considered a condition in which policymakers mistake short-term tactical victories for long-term geopolitical transformations and strategic success. In the buildup to a



strategic mirage, policymakers mistake temporary military advantages as drivers of producing a stable political order. Unlike an illusion, which is a false perception, a strategic mirage actively shapes policy. Policymakers believe that something achievable is possible. The Korean War was the first conventional war fought after World War II (Williams, 2024). The United States, North Korea, and China were the principal actors in that war. North Korea had the support of the Soviet Union and China (Hart-Landsberg, 2000). Fought during the Cold War, it showcased the emergence of the first post-World War II global network of alliances and military deployments, constituting the initial display of the US grand strategy of containment.

Today, a similar grand strategy is being employed, although through a different form of warfare, against a different ideological opponent and in a different era, to contain Iran. So far, in the Iran War, the US has refrained from using ground troops and resisted the temptation to resort to land war. However, the similarities in the US military approach in both the Korean War and the War with Iran highlight how US policymakers build a strategic mirage by continuing to make policies that pursue attractive but unattainable political goals.

In the case of the Korean War, the US was operating under the Truman Doctrine and also the United Nations Resolutions, and the initial objective was to repel the North Korean attack and restore the border at the 38th parallel (Lindsay, 2026). This objective changed after an initial military success and expanded to the total defeat of the North Korean regime. The American political objective also enlarged to include the re-unification of the peninsula under a future democratic government. However, when the Chinese intervened and pushed the UN troops back, the US military objective changed to protect South Korea until an armistice was signed in 1953 (Lindsay, 2026).

In the case of the Iran War, the US had no United Nations Resolution to support its action (Akram et al., 2026). The initial US political objective in the Iran War was to apply a maximum pressure campaign through coercive diplomacy to bring about a regime change (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2025). Despite repeated air strikes in alliance with Israel, assassination of the Iranian civilian and military leadership, and execution of a naval blockade, the US failed to force a change in the Iranian state behavior (BBC, 2026). As the stalemate prevailed, the US utilized the services of Pakistan as a mediator to agree to a ceasefire and also agree to an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that gave 60 days of leverage to the principal actors of this conflict (Husain, 2026). This period was to be used to come to terms with each other's strategic and security concerns and reach a deal.

However, the ceasefire has been violated, and the airstrikes and missile attacks have now continued from both sides. The US policymakers' belief that its military campaign in North Korea would eventually produce a new political order was a strategic mirage. Even 73 years after the end of that war, North and South Korea are still divided, and the US continues to provide military security to South Korea through its permanent military deployment and presence (Choi, 2023). Today, in the Iran War, the same central strategic question that remained unanswered during the Korean War persists: whether this war with Iran will fundamentally transform the Middle East to a New Middle



East or will we once again confuse tactical and short-term military success with a long-term political transformation.

Iraq and Afghanistan: Earlier Strategic Mirages

The other two examples of US policymakers making costly decisions in building strategic mirage are Afghanistan and Iraq. The US chased a strategic mirage in Iraq by assuming that its military superiority alone could transform politics, resulting in its failure to impose democracy in Iraq after its expensive military invasion (Haass, 2013). Similarly, in Afghanistan, it took the US two decades to understand that the political objective of converting Afghanistan into a Western-style democracy was unattainable (Haass, 2013).

The current confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran has revived claims that the Middle East as a region is undergoing a fundamental strategic transformation. To analyze this claim, this paper analyzes this conflict through theoretical perspectives of realism, balance of power, coercive diplomacy, and regional security complex theory by distinguishing between military success and strategic transformation. Iran argues that its military buildup is for its defense, but the US and Israel view it as offensive, and this leads to the creation of the security dilemma. All three principal actors view their military actions as defensive while viewing the military actions of others as offensive.

Iran War – Conflict Analysis Under a Theoretical Framework

Use of Coercive Diplomacy

After the breach of the MOU in the Iran War, the United States has maintained a sustained campaign of strikes against Iran, which has responded with missile and drone attacks on American and regional targets. At this stage, the conflict reflects continuation of coercive diplomacy, not war (Grieco, 2026). Coercive diplomacy is not war in the traditional sense. It is the calibrated use or threat of limited force designed to compel an opponent to alter its behavior without seeking its outright military defeat (Collins, 2020; Jakobsen, 2020).

Technically, only when the US decides to use brute force will the use of coercive diplomacy in this conflict end. History tells us that this will not be possible while fighting this war with limited force. The big question on the minds of the US political leadership and military strategists at this stage is: Do we want a temporary/tactical success, or a strategic/lasting success? The current escalation in the conflict demonstrates that the US's limited-force approach to achieving its political objective is on the verge of failure. This means that the use of coercive diplomacy is also nearing its culminating point. The use of inducements and threats and limited war were the two drivers of this coercive diplomacy, but the Iranian non-compliance has resulted in its failure. In its current stage, the conflict appears to be approaching the threshold where coercive diplomacy risks giving way to brute force (Jakobsen, 2020).

Coercive diplomacy became central to Western conflict management after World War II and the



beginning of the Cold War. According to Peter Viggo Jakobsen, a total of 21 coercive diplomacy exchanges took place between Western states and various states in eight different conflicts, and only one resulted in success by use of threats and sanctions (Jakobsen, 2020). It was in 2001, when Pakistan agreed to stop supporting the Taliban and join hands with the US to fight the war on terror. The rest were settled either through the use of limited force (Kosovo, Libya, Haiti, Somalia, Syria), or the use of brute force (Afghanistan, Iraq) (Jakobsen, 2020).

In the case of the first Iraq War, the air campaign and use of limited war failed to deliver Iraqi compliance. The war that followed the air campaign signaled a shift from coercive diplomacy to the use of brute force. When the US could no longer persuade Saddam Hussein, it decided to force Iraq to vacate Kuwait through a physical assault on the ground. The use of coercive diplomacy against the Taliban also failed as they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden and cease support of al-Qaeda. What followed was the use of brute force and a twenty-year-long war in Afghanistan (Jakobsen, 2020).

For coercive diplomacy to succeed, the coercer's credibility is of extreme importance to the opponent. Iran's original nuclear deal, JCPOA, was set aside by the Trump administration during President Trump's first term in office (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). The twelve-day war – fought from June 13 to 25 between Iran and Israel and later joined by the US – ended when a Qatar-mediated ceasefire took effect (Lob et al., 2025). Yet, peace could not hold, and Iran was once again attacked in February 2026.

From Tehran's perspective, compliance carries strategic risks because every concession may invite additional demands. In 1939, the Soviet Union asked Finland to hand over a few Islands. The Finns feared that if they fulfilled this Soviet demand, new demands would follow, so they refused to hand over the Islands, which resulted in the Winter War (Jakobsen, 2020). In the case of Iran, the US has only inflamed the country's nationalism and national enthusiasm by labeling it as part of the Axis of evil, rogue, irrational, fanatical, crazy, and uncivilized. Threatening it with regime change, assassination of its leadership through military strikes, and pushing it back to the Stone Age, the US has inadvertently left Iran with no option but to consider itself in a no-win situation. With Iran's vital interests at stake, both its leadership and the public are mobilized to see this conflict in zero-sum terms.

The United States has once again built a strategic mirage with military and political goals that seem unachievable. The US faces a strategic dilemma: persist with a coercive strategy that is yielding diminishing returns, or escalate to a form of warfare whose consequences may far exceed its anticipated benefits (Ehsan, 2026). For now, history suggests that prudence should prevail over escalation.

Offensive Realism

In the case of US-Israel aggression, the US military action is guided by the Theory of Offensive



Realism. Both states clearly demonstrate that they cannot be certain about Iranian intentions, not today and not even tomorrow. From a realist perspective, both states may be driven by the classic security dilemma instead of pure aggression. Given this demonstrated uncertainty by the two states, Iran has been pushed to believe in its own insecurity and views every US-Israel action with suspicion.

Viewing the deployment of US troops in the region through the lens of offensive realism, answering some critical questions will determine whether the US will once again indulge in fighting another forever war: Will the US initiate military action to occupy the islands south of Iran? Will Iran give up its right to uranium enrichment? Will Iran compromise on its ballistic missile capability, especially when it is under attack? Will the US be able to open the Strait of Hormuz by military action? The answers to these questions are related to changing conditions on the ground. Iran was at the negotiating table twice before the start of this war. Now, given how conditions have changed on the ground, Iran's terms at the negotiating table have changed; it now demands sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz (Sabaghi, 2026). Today, the conditions on the ground dictate that Iran's biggest bargaining chip is the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran's strategic interest demands that it does not allow the US to take it off the negotiating table.

Balance of Threat

Iran's current foreign policy is built on the Balance of Threat Theory, which states that any state will always balance against threat. Balance of Threat theory is driven by the combination of three variables: the first is the aggregate capability and capacity of a state to wage war, the second is geography, and the third is the perceived intentions of the aggressor (Ahmed, 2024). Iran has continued to fight and continues to inflict costs for fighting this war on both the US and Israel. Iran, by utilizing and maximizing the utility of its geography, appears to have strangled the Strait of Hormuz and has managed to establish a deterrence against the US and Israel. How Iran perceives aggressive intentions is embedded in the fear of neutralization of its nuclear programme, military action against the armed groups or proxies that support it in the region, and possible military action to capture islands in the south of Iran to control, influence, and manage the Strait of Hormuz (ELDoh, 2026).

Although the Cold War was not just about the balance of threat but also ideology and nuclear deterrence, US state practitioners still dealt with the Soviet Union under the framework of the Balance of Threat Theory and, much like Iran, the Soviet Union was inferior to the US in most categories of power (Ehsan, 2026). In the anarchic international system, Iran, like the Soviet Union, is likely to continue to balance against the threat in this war. Unless the US and Israel, the two states and practitioners of the Theory of Offensive Realism, can reconsider the realist adage, "inhumanity is in fact humanity under pressure," they will continue to apply maximum pressure and threat campaigns against Iran, and Iran may continue to sustain this pressure and balance against what it considers an existential threat.



Economic Interdependence

Recent conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine War, have demonstrated that battlefield success depends heavily on economic factors. Russia has adapted to sanctions by redirecting trade and mobilizing its industry. Ukraine's ability to fight has depended substantially on Western financial and military assistance. The conflict has become, in part, a contest of industrial production and economic endurance (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Similarly, during World War II, the Allies ultimately prevailed not simply because of superior battlefield tactics but because their combined industrial and economic capacity vastly exceeded that of the Axis powers (Riefler, 1947). The Iran War demonstrates that future wars will not necessarily be won by the side that inflicts the greatest destruction, but by the side that endures the longest while preserving its economic vitality and political cohesion (Bi, 2026). The conflict suggests that the decisive contest in modern warfare is no longer simply over territory or battlefield victory. Future wars may therefore be won not merely by the side that can destroy the most, but by the side that can absorb the greatest shocks while sustaining its national power (Ehsan, 2026).

The Reality of the Iran War

The War in Iran was fought with a genuine American intention of creating a new Middle Eastern order. A new order in the Middle East could emerge if military action against Iran permanently changed the existing strategic balance. The balance would change only if Iran's military capabilities were sufficiently weakened, its influence on regional allies and proxies reduced, the strategic position of Israel and its Gulf allies strengthened, American influence and deterrence in the Middle East expanded, and new ways and possibilities emerged for security and diplomatic arrangements in the Middle East.

Only under such conditions can the emergence of the New Middle East not merely be a slogan but an objective reality of geopolitical transformation. Many scholars predicted that the Arab Spring would create a new Middle Eastern order, but their assumption seemed to be profoundly misplaced. The Arab Spring never resulted in the emergence of successful new democracies that could reshape regional relations. The traditional great powers, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, are barely functional states, and the wealthy and repressive Gulf countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates continue to thrive (Lynch, 2018).

Even relatively successful states such as Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia are grappling with massive economic problems, discontented youth, and unstable neighbours (Lynch, 2018). The reality is that the economic and political problems that drove the region towards the Arab Spring in 2011 are more ripe and intense today. The Middle Eastern reality is reflected in the repeated American administrations' support for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and ignoring the need for reform and important structural changes. Unless this becomes the US foreign policy focus, no order will produce stability or even advance US interests in the region. The Middle East is just another part of the world where the United States has flawed allies, vicious adversaries, and enduring interests. It will not be able to escape this reality anytime soon, no matter how appealing the



prospects may be (Satloff, 2019).

Illusion

An illusion is something that appears real but is not. In strategic affairs, an illusion develops when policymakers believe they have fundamentally changed political realities, while only the surface has changed. In strategic terms, examples of illusion include military victories mistaken for political success, destruction of military infrastructure mistaken for strategic defeat, regime pressure mistaken for regime collapse, and temporary calm mistaken for lasting peace.

When the 2003 invasion of Iraq began, many of the war's proponents believed that Iraq would quickly become a thriving democracy that would set the example for the rest of the Middle East (Marsi, 2023). But that remained an illusion. The US has some vital interests in the Middle East, including a deep commitment to Israel's security, opposition to terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, and a commitment to safeguarding access to regional energy resources (Haass, 2013). To safeguard these interests, US policies of undertaking military interventions to overthrow hostile regimes or prop up friendly ones are increasingly becoming untenable and should be avoided given the high costs and uncertain payoffs.

The reason for these illusory and uncertain payoffs is some of the underlying political, sectarian, ideological, and geopolitical rivalries that remain intact. Politically, Iran and Israel, and even Saudi Arabia and Iran, contest and compete for the leadership of the Gulf and the regional order. Even Turkey competes with Israel over regional influence and on the Palestinian issue. Turkey also contests for Sunni leadership of the Middle East, whereas the UAE and Qatar are growing more independent in terms of their autonomy and independent foreign policy.

The Middle East is also experiencing a contest between political Islam propagated by Iran and secular nationalism being adopted by many leading Gulf States. This is pitting revolutionary Islam against conservative monarchism, with the former accused of exporting revolution and the latter of preserving monarchy. Geopolitically, the US and Israel compete with Iran and are fighting wars to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East. Under such circumstances, the emergence of a New Middle East is illusory and exists only in rhetoric.

Strategic Mirage

A mirage is more than an illusion. In the desert, a mirage results from atmospheric conditions that make people believe they see water where none exists. In strategy, a strategic mirage is an attractive yet fundamentally unattainable objective that continually draws policymakers toward increasingly costly decisions. Unlike an illusion—which is simply a false perception—a strategic mirage actively shapes policy because decision-makers pursue something that appears achievable but continually recedes.

Some examples of strategic mirage in Middle Eastern history include the belief that democracy



could easily be imposed in Iraq, expecting Afghanistan to become a stable Western-style state, and assuming military superiority alone can permanently transform regional politics. Applied to the Middle East, a strategic mirage suggests that external powers repeatedly believe they can redesign the region through military force, but every intervention creates new political realities instead of the intended order, and the desired destination keeps moving further away. Any vision of the region finding a workable balance of power is a mirage; the likelihood of a new order in the Middle East is fundamentally one of disorder (Lynch, 2018).

The biggest strategic mirage in the Middle East is emerging from the realities of the War in Iran. That strategic mirage suggests that the US must stop following the idea of imposing a regional order on its own terms, as it no longer has the power to do so. Arab regimes no longer see the US as a reliable guarantor of their security, regime survival, or foreign policy interests (Lynch, 2018). In the post-Iran War environment, it makes sense for even close US allies to build relationships with other countries, including China and Russia. The defense pact signed between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey seems to be one such arrangement and a rational hedge against the unpredictability of the United States (Atlantic Council, 2026).

Conclusion

The research focused on analyzing whether a genuine transformation of the Middle East is likely to occur. With historical examples, the study explained that the transformation may be an illusion and may only appear to occur. In the Middle Eastern context, strategic mirage was described as the US continuing attempts to pursue transformation despite repeatedly discovering that the transformation was unattainable. The study made an effort to move systematically from theories, facts, and perceptions to strategic realities. As the Iran War continues, this study leaves room for further investigation and research to answer the fundamental question: Is the Middle East being transformed, or will we once again confuse military success with political transformation?

The answer will depend on distinguishing between military outcomes and strategic outcomes. A military campaign may destroy capabilities, but a new regional order requires bigger and more enduring changes, such as a stable balance of power, acceptable political legitimacy, sustainable security arrangements, regional consensus, economic integration, and durable diplomatic institutions. Without these elements, battlefield victories may remain tactical achievements rather than strategic transformation.



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