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AMERICA TRAPPED

Geopolitical Analysis of the Conflict with Iran and Its Systemic Implications

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Introduction

The conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most complex and dangerous junctions of contemporary geopolitics. It is not a contingent crisis arising from a single isolated episode or a diplomatic miscalculation; it is the mature outcome of decades of structural tensions accumulated along the fault

lines of the struggle for regional hegemony, the control of energy resources, and the redefinition of the international order. The reflections and debates generated within CESMAR, which gave rise to an internal document entitled “America Trapped”—from which this summary draws its inspiration—argue with rigorous analytical care that Washington is caught in a systemic trap from which there is no exit through any of the options traditionally at the disposal of a great power: neither military victory, nor negotiation, nor withdrawal. The understanding of this stalemate is the indispensable prerequisite for anyone seeking to analyze the dynamics of the conflict and its implications, far beyond the regional perimeter.

A trap for the United States

The starting point of the analysis is the phenomenon of war inertia, systematically documented in the literature on armed conflicts. According to this mechanism, wars tend to develop a logic of their own (the “fog of war”) that escapes the control of political decision-makers: the conflict ceases to be a mere instrument of policy—what Carl von Clausewitz theorized—and becomes itself the context within which politics unfolds. In the case of the US–Iran confrontation, this inertia is further reinforced by the sunk-cost fallacy: the more a government has invested in a war—in terms of human lives, financial resources, and political capital—the more difficult it becomes to justify an exit from the conflict. To stop seems, in public and political perception, tantamount to admitting that all the sacrifices hitherto endured were in vain. Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan: each time the same spiral, each time the same mechanism that drags the conflict toward escalation rather than disengagement.

The first concrete trap identified concerns the cease-fire. Even assuming that both sides wanted to negotiate, the conditions Tehran would place on the table would be practically unacceptable for Washington. Iran would demand massive economic reparations—on the order of one trillion dollars—as compensation for the damage caused by decades of sanctions and by the ongoing conflict. Yet the most strategically disruptive condition would be the permanent withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the entire Middle Eastern region. Accepting this demand would mean depriving the Gulf monarchies of their protection, turning them into Iranian client-states, and triggering a chain reaction with globally significant effects.

The second trap is that of land invasion. The island of Kharg—through which about 90 percent of Iranian oil exports pass—exerts a comprehensible strategic attraction for any American military planner: neutralizing it would mean financially strangling Tehran. However, the island’s geographic proximity to the Iranian coast would turn any attempt at conquest into a prolonged defensive quagmire, subjected to incessant artillery, drone, and missile fire. The logic of mission creep would inevitably lead from the island to the mainland, from the mainland to the Zagros heights, and from the heights to the Iranian interior—the same pattern that in 1965 turned 3,000 Marines in Da Nang into half a million troops along a 2,000 kilometer front.

The third trap is the U.S. military instrument itself. Authoritative sources indicate that Pentagon simulations consistently conclude with an American defeat in every large-scale war scenario against Iran. Not because the United States is militarily inferior in absolute terms, but because its operational model—designed for high-intensity conventional warfare, with air superiority and precision strikes—is structurally ill-suited to the type of war Iran is capable of waging: dispersed forces, drones, hypersonic missiles, proxy warfare via regional militia networks, and deeply buried military infrastructure.

Geopolitical and strategic consequences

The geopolitical consequences of the US–Iran stalemate unfold on a global scale and affect the structure of the international order itself. The first and most immediate effect is the erosion of the credibility of the American security guarantee. If Washington is unable to resolve militarily a confrontation with a regional power like Iran—and cannot even withdraw without triggering catastrophic effects—then allied and partner states across the globe are compelled to draw logical conclusions about the reliability of American security commitments. Japan and South Korea, facing the weakening of Washington’s strategic guarantee, would accelerate their own autonomous rearmament processes, diverting resources away from the purchase of American weapons. Europe might be induced to seek an accommodation with Russia, downgrading its participation in Western collective security structures.

On the strategic plane, the confrontation with Iran clearly illustrates the misalignment between the American model of power and the conditions of the contemporary international system. The United States built its post-war hegemony on three pillars: conventional military superiority, control of global financial flows through the dollar, and a worldwide network of bases and alliances. All three pillars reveal structural cracks in the context of the Iranian confrontation. Conventional military superiority does not translate into effective coercive power in the face of asymmetric warfare. Control over global finance through the dollar is threatened by the ongoing de-dollarization process that the very policy of sanctions has accelerated, pushing an increasing number of countries to seek alternatives to the SWIFT system and to dollar-denominated commercial transactions. The network of bases and alliances is perceived, by an ever-larger number of actors, more as an instrument of control than of protection.

The most relevant strategic dimension, however, concerns the systemic competition with China. The prolongation of the conflict with Iran diverts American military, diplomatic, and financial resources away from the Indo-Pacific theater, which Washington's planners identify as the strategic priority of the twenty-first century. Every dollar spent in the Persian Gulf is a dollar not invested in strengthening deterrence against Beijing. Every Middle Eastern crisis that absorbs American diplomacy is a crisis that reduces Washington's capacity to build and consolidate coalitions across East Asia. The Iranian trap is thus also a strategic trap in the broadest sense: it not only constrains options in the Gulf, but reduces the overall capacity of the United States to manage the transition toward a multipolar international system.

The risk of nuclear proliferation adds yet another layer of geopolitical complexity. If Iran concludes that its very survival depends on the possession of a nuclear deterrent—a conclusion that the confrontation with a nuclear power like the United States renders rationally understandable—the threshold for proliferation in the region would drop dramatically. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt would find themselves in a position where acquiring their own nuclear capabilities would become an almost irresistible temptation, with highly destabilizing consequences for the global non-proliferation regime.

Maritime consequences

The maritime consequences of the US–Iran conflict are concentrated around the Strait of Hormuz, the planet's most critical energy chokepoint. Through its two narrow shipping lanes—two nautical miles each—pass every day approximately 20 percent of global oil trade and a significant share of the world's liquefied natural gas. There are no alternative routes capable of absorbing these volumes: the combined capacity of the alternative pipelines on the Arabian Peninsula is about seven million barrels per day, compared with the 17 million that normally transit the Strait. Any disruption of maritime traffic in this corridor produces immediate effects on global energy markets: an instant rise in the price of oil, a spike in freight rates, and a tightening of insurance conditions for transiting vessels.

Iran possesses concrete tools to make this threat credible without necessarily closing the Strait in full. The tactic of naval swarming—multiple simultaneous attacks by fast, light craft against naval vessels or tankers in transit—combined with mine warfare and coastal anti-ship missiles, is sufficient to block commercial traffic through the deterrent effect it produces on shipping companies and maritime insurers. A few mines in congested waters, or even an unverified report of their presence, can induce shipping companies to reroute, thereby causing immediate increases in transport costs.

On the financial plane, the deepest consequences impact the petrodollar system. The mechanism through which Gulf oil exports are denominated in U.S. dollars creates a structural demand for the American currency in international markets, artificially sustaining the dollar's value and providing indirect financing for the federal public debt, which has now approached 39 trillion dollars. The petrodollars accumulated by exporting countries are recycled into American financial markets via the purchase of Treasury securities, stocks, and corporate bonds. A prolonged blockade of the Strait of Hormuz would place acute stress on this mechanism: the Gulf monarchies, deprived of American protection, would be incentivized to accelerate the diversification of their reserves and to negotiate oil deals in alternative currencies—yuan foremost—thereby furthering the de-dollarization process already underway on a global scale. Interest rates on U.S. debt would have to rise significantly to attract alternative capital,

with potentially destabilizing consequences for federal public finance and the entire international financial architecture.

For Italy, these dynamics are not abstract; they have immediate economic and strategic relevance. Italy is one of the European economies most dependent on energy imports: historically, a significant share of its oil and gas requirements comes from the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, regions directly exposed to the effects of any escalation in the US–Iran conflict. A prolonged rise in the price of oil—an almost certain effect of even a partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz—would translate at once into higher energy costs for Italian households and enterprises, creating an inflationary impulse that would compress internal consumption and damage the competitiveness of the national manufacturing system, already facing intense international competition.

Italy's geographic position, lying at the center of the Mediterranean, renders the country particularly exposed to the effects of any destabilization of the Middle East and North Africa. The intensification of conflict in the Gulf would accelerate migratory flows toward the Italian coast, putting pressure on reception infrastructure and fueling domestic social and political tensions. At the same time, Italy's position as a NATO member places it in a zone of potential friction: any escalation that directly involved U.S. forces might produce pressure on the Alliance to take a more decisive stand, with direct implications for the American military bases present on Italian soil—Sigonella, Aviano, Vicenza—which could become either symbolic or real targets of Iranian retaliation or that of its regional allies.

On the commercial and maritime plane, Italy is one of the Mediterranean's leading commercial maritime powers, with a port and logistics system of primary importance. An interruption of traffic through the Suez Canal—already tested by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea between 2023 and 2024—would directly hit the value chains of Italian export-oriented firms, forcing them to take longer routes around the Cape of Good Hope at considerably higher transport costs and longer delivery times. The shipbuilding, maritime shipping, and port logistics sectors—areas in which Italy excels at the European level—would suffer significant repercussions from the instability of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern shipping routes.

Finally, the impact on Italy's financial system must be considered. Italy is one of the eurozone countries with the highest public-debt-to-GDP ratios. A deterioration of global financial conditions—triggered by an energy crisis, by recession in importing economies, and by rising U.S. interest rates—would inevitably widen the spread between Italian and German government bonds, increasing the cost of refinancing public debt and constraining the room for maneuver of national fiscal policy. In a context of already high financial fragility, even a moderate-intensity external shock could trigger market dynamics that would be difficult to control.

Conclusions

The framework outlined by the essay “America Trapped” is that of a great power that has reached the structural limits of its model of hegemony. The systemic trap in which Washington finds itself is not the product of contingent errors of leadership or mistaken tactical choices: it is the outcome of deep contradictions accumulated over decades. War inertia, the cease-fire trap, the risk of land escalation, and the inadequacy of the conventional military instrument converge to depict a landscape in which none of the available options is free of devastating costs. As Paul Kennedy observed in his study of the cycles of hegemony, great powers do not decline because they are militarily defeated, but because the cost of maintaining global commitments eventually exceeds the resources available.

The way out indicated by the essay is clear in its logic, even if arduous in its political feasibility. Washington would need to initiate a transition toward a model of cooperative, multilateral leadership: abandoning the global network of military bases as an instrument of control, giving up the use of the dollar as a weapon of economic pressure, and recognizing legitimate security interests even in actors currently perceived as adversaries—Russia, China, Iran. This does not amount to surrender or the abandonment of American national interests. It is an acknowledgment that, in an increasingly multipolar international system, leadership is exercised through the capacity to build coalitions and to provide global public goods—stability, open markets, shared rules—rather than through military coercion.

For Italy and for Europe, the message is equally clear. Energy dependence, the vulnerability of shipping routes, and financial fragility make strategic investment in autonomy urgent: diversification of energy sources, strengthening of

European defense capabilities, and construction of independent diplomatic channels with the protagonists of the Middle Eastern crisis. Strategic wisdom—the capacity to subordinate short-term interests to long-term stability—is the scarcest and, at the same time, the most valuable resource in this historical moment. The most important question of our time is not whether the United States will have to change course, but whether it will do so through a conscious choice or under the traumatic pressure of events.

The sunk-cost fallacy is the logical error by which states—and sometimes individuals—continue to invest resources—time, money, or effort—into something that is not working, only because they have already “spent” a great deal in the past.

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