



War and Power in the Twenty-First Century: Decision-Making Architecture and Legitimacy in United States War Policy. The Case of Iran in a Transforming International System

Guerra y poder en el siglo XXI: arquitectura de la decisión y legitimidad en la política de guerra de Estados Unidos. El caso de Irán en un sistema internacional en transformación

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary model of war decision-making in the United States through the case of the conflict with Iran and its political, institutional, economic, geopolitical, and social implications. The study is based on the premise that war in the twenty-first century can no longer be understood solely as a military or presidential decision, but rather as a complex process of constructing and sustaining legitimacy, simultaneously conditioned by domestic and external factors. Throughout the study, the article analyzes the fragmented architecture of the U.S. decision-making system, in which executive authority, legal constraints derived from the War Powers Resolution, the role of Congress, the influence of the national security apparatus, public opinion pressures, and the dynamics of international alliances converge. The analysis demonstrates that, although the Executive Branch retains broad operational capacity to initiate military action, the political sustainability of a conflict depends on the continuous interaction among domestic legitimacy, strategic coherence, and public perceptions regarding the costs of war. The article also examines the role of political language and narrative construction in contexts of conflict. It argues that the legitimacy of war is not a permanent resource, but rather a political asset that must be continuously reconstructed through narratives aimed at justifying intervention, containing domestic erosion, and preserving cohesion among strategic allies. In this sense, political discourse does not merely describe the reality of conflict; it actively contributes to structuring it. The study also addresses the role of allies within the architecture of strategic decision-making, demonstrating that contemporary alliances function less as automatic mechanisms of military obedience and more as flexible systems for aggregating sovereign decisions. The case of the conflict with Iran reveals growing tensions within the Western bloc, particularly between the United States and certain European allies, whose perceptions regarding the risks, costs, and objectives of the conflict do not always fully converge.

Key words: Contemporary warfare; United States; Iran; decision-making; costs of war; Strait of Hormuz; multipolarity.

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War and Power in the Twenty-First Century: Decision-Making Architecture and Legitimacy in United States War Policy. The Case of Iran in a Transforming International System

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Resumen

El presente artículo analiza el modelo contemporáneo de decisión de guerra en Estados Unidos a partir del caso del conflicto con Irán y sus implicaciones políticas, institucionales, económicas, geopolíticas y sociales. El estudio se basa en la premisa de que la guerra en el siglo XXI no puede entenderse únicamente como una decisión militar o presidencial, sino como un proceso complejo de construcción y sostenimiento de legitimidad, condicionado simultáneamente por factores internos y externos. A lo largo del trabajo se examina la arquitectura fragmentada del sistema de decisión estadounidense, en la que convergen la autoridad ejecutiva, las restricciones legales derivadas de la *War Powers Resolution*, el papel del Congreso, la influencia del aparato de seguridad nacional, la presión de la opinión pública y la dinámica de las alianzas internacionales. El análisis demuestra que, aunque el Poder Ejecutivo conserva una amplia capacidad operativa para iniciar acciones militares, la sostenibilidad política de un conflicto depende de la interacción permanente entre legitimidad interna, coherencia estratégica y percepción social de los costos de la guerra. El artículo también examina el papel del lenguaje político y de la construcción narrativa en contextos de conflicto. Se sostiene que la legitimidad de la guerra no constituye un recurso permanente, sino un activo político que requiere ser continuamente reconstruido mediante narrativas orientadas a justificar la intervención, contener el desgaste interno y preservar la cohesión de los aliados estratégicos. En este sentido, el discurso político no solo describe la realidad del conflicto, sino que contribuye activamente a estructurarla. El estudio aborda igualmente el papel de los aliados dentro de la arquitectura de decisión estratégica, demostrando que las alianzas contemporáneas funcionan menos como mecanismos automáticos de obediencia militar y más como sistemas flexibles de agregación de decisiones soberanas. El caso del conflicto con Irán evidencia tensiones crecientes dentro del bloque occidental, especialmente entre Estados Unidos y algunos aliados europeos, cuyas percepciones sobre los riesgos, costos y objetivos del conflicto no siempre coinciden plenamente.

Palabras clave: Guerra contemporánea; Estados Unidos; Irán; toma de decisiones; costos de guerra; Estrecho de Ormuz; multipolaridad.

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1 Introduction

In an international context marked by simultaneous crises, rising geopolitical tensions, and the transformation of armed conflict, war in the twenty-first century can no longer be understood solely as a military confrontation between states. Beyond the battlefield, it has become a complex process in which political decisions, institutional structures, and dynamics of legitimacy, perception, and narrative construction interact simultaneously.

Analyzing war exclusively through its formal architecture — that is, through the institutional and normative frameworks regulating the use of force — is insufficient to understand how decisions are actually made in times of crisis. In practice, such decisions are conditioned by political pressures, operational urgency, and dynamics of perception that directly influence their development.

Recent developments surrounding Iran provide a particularly valuable case through which to examine these tensions. In this context, the evolution of the conflict has been accompanied by verifiable elements that reveal the decision-making process in practical terms: coordinated or simultaneous military actions among allies, direct U.S. responses against strategic Iranian targets, as well as public divergences regarding the characterization of the threat and shifts in key positions within the national security apparatus.

These elements demonstrate that the conduct of war does not follow a strictly linear model based solely on technical assessment and rational decision-making. Rather, it reflects a process in which strategic and political factors interact continuously with reactions to the behavior of other international actors.

Within this framework, it becomes essential to distinguish between the formal architecture of decision-making — the institutional model that organizes and legitimizes the use of force — and its actual

dynamics under conditions of high strategic pressure. This distinction makes it possible to understand not only how these mechanisms are supposed to function, but also how they operate when subjected to uncertainty, urgency, and divergent interpretations.

The central objective of this study is to answer the following question: how is war decided, conducted, and legitimized in the twenty-first century?

To address this question, the article adopts an analytical approach that uses the case of Iran as a cross-cutting framework through which to observe the interaction among decision-making architecture, strategic coherence, institutional execution, and processes of legitimacy and perception. This approach makes it possible to identify the gap between the formal design of wartime decision-making processes and their practical implementation, as well as the risks associated with that gap under conditions of heightened geopolitical tension. At the geopolitical level, the article argues that the conflict reflects broader transformations within the contemporary international system, characterized by the relative weakening of the unipolar order and the transition toward a more fragmented and multipolar configuration. The study further examines the implications of the conflict for the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, regional security in the Middle East, and the credibility of traditional systems of deterrence and alliances.

2. Conceptual framework: war as a multidimensional process

2.1 From Classical Warfare to Contemporary Warfare

The understanding of war has evolved from the classical tradition of strategic thought toward contemporary approaches that incorporate political, informational, and social dimensions. In its classical formulation, war was understood as an essentially interstate phenomenon in which the use of force constituted an instrument subordinated to political objectives. This perspective,

associated with Carl von Clausewitz, established the central idea of war as the continuation of politics by other means.

However, the transformation of the international system, the technological revolution, and the growing centrality of information have broadened this conceptual framework. In contemporary strategic literature, this shift has been analyzed as a transition from state-centered models toward more complex and diffuse forms of conflict. Authors such as Martin van Creveld and Lawrence Freedman have argued that contemporary warfare must be understood as a dynamic and uncertain process shaped not only by military capabilities, but also by perceptions, narratives, technology, non-state actors, and political decisions evolving in real time.

Within this context, war ceases to be a strictly military phenomenon and becomes a process in which multiple rationalities converge and interact simultaneously.

2.2 Integration of Dimensions: Decision, Execution, Legitimacy, and Perception

Building upon this evolution, contemporary warfare may be understood as a multidimensional process in which four fundamental dimensions converge: decision, execution, legitimacy, and perception.

Decision refers to the formulation of strategic objectives at the political level. Execution encompasses their institutional and military implementation. Legitimacy relates to the political, legal, and moral justification for the use of force. Finally, perception refers to the construction of narratives and the manner in which conflict is interpreted both domestically and internationally.

These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they influence one another, generating tensions that may affect the coherence of the overall strategic process.

The contemporary case of Iran makes it possible to observe this interaction analytically. During the development of the

conflict, shifts emerged in the political discourse surrounding strategic objectives, as well as divergences between intelligence assessments and public statements regarding the nature of the threat (TIME, 2025; Reuters, 2025). These dynamics simultaneously affect the legitimacy of the conflict, its international perception, and its internal strategic coherence.

2.3 War as a Political, Strategic, and Social Phenomenon

From this perspective, contemporary warfare must be understood as a process in which political, strategic, and social dimensions converge. As Carl von Clausewitz argued, war constitutes the continuation of politics by other means, implying that its objectives, limits, and forms of conduct cannot be separated from the political context that produces and sustains it.

In contemporary democracies, this interaction acquires additional complexity due to the simultaneous participation of state institutions, public opinion, media organizations, economic actors, and international alliances in the construction of the conflict's legitimacy. From an economic and human security perspective, the comprehensive cost of war, including direct military expenditures, strategic logistics, weapons replacement, the impact on public debt, and indirect consequences for the domestic economy. The analysis highlights that contemporary conflicts generate systemic effects extending far beyond the military sphere, affecting supply chains, energy markets, inflation, and global financial stability. Particular attention is devoted to the strategic role of the Strait of Hormuz as a critical node of the global economy and to the manner in which geopolitical uncertainty rapidly transmits itself to international markets.

Its sustainability depends not solely on military superiority, but also on the ability to maintain coherence across these different levels of decision-making and political perception. When such coherence weakens,

the risks of strategic misalignment, loss of legitimacy, and unintended conflict expansion increase significantly.

In recent developments involving Iran, this misalignment can be observed in the coexistence of multiple narratives regarding the objectives of the conflict and in the presence of divergent interpretations within the national security apparatus itself (CNN, 2026; The Washington Post, 2026). These elements are not peripheral; rather, they are indicative of structural tensions inherent to the contemporary conduct of war.

2.4 Conceptual Application: Strategic Decision-Making, Intelligence, and Comparative Lessons

The analysis of wartime decision-making makes it possible to understand how states construct strategic decisions through the interaction between available intelligence, political interpretation, and the definition of strategic threats.

In other words, intelligence information does not operate as an automatic determinant of decision-making, but rather as an input that is interpreted, filtered, and translated into political decisions that may lead to or justify the use of force.

A classic example of this dynamic is the case of Iraq in 2003, where intervention was justified largely on the basis of intelligence assessments regarding the existence of weapons of mass destruction, which were subsequently not corroborated following the occupation of the country. This episode revealed the gap between intelligence production, political interpretation, and the legitimacy of the use of force.

In the case of Iran, the interaction between intelligence and strategic decision-making also reveals important analytical elements. The U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) testified before Congress that there was no conclusive evidence indicating that Iran was actively developing a nuclear weapon or had reactivated a program in that direction (TIME, 2025; Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2025).

The significance of this assessment becomes particularly important considering that the Director of National Intelligence occupies the central coordinating position within the U.S. intelligence system, overseeing a structure composed of 18 civilian and military agencies and components, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the intelligence branch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Nevertheless, the technical intelligence assessment coexisted with broader political interpretations of the conflict and with the incorporation of additional arguments into strategic discourse — including considerations related to energy resources and regional stability (Financial Times, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026) — thereby expanding the framework within which strategic objectives were defined.

Taken together, these elements demonstrate that strategic decision-making in wartime contexts does not respond solely to technical criteria, but rather to the dynamic interaction among information, political interpretation, and the definition of strategic priorities.

3. Architecture of decision-making in the United States

3.1 Formal decision-making process

Decision-making regarding the use of force in the United States is governed by a constitutional and institutional framework in which executive authority, congressional powers, and oversight mechanisms derived from war powers legislation converge.

The Constitution designates the President as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, while Congress retains the authority to declare war and authorize the use of force through instruments such as the Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF). This design establishes a formal system of balance in which the decision to

resort to force is shared between both branches.

Within this framework operates the War Powers Resolution (WPR) of 1973, adopted after the Vietnam War with the objective of limiting unilateral expansion of executive power. The Resolution establishes two central obligations: notification to Congress within 48 hours after the initiation of hostilities and a 60-day limit on the use of force without legislative authorization, extendable for an additional 30 days to allow for the orderly withdrawal of forces.

In practice, this mechanism seeks to guarantee political oversight and institutional transparency. However, its application has historically remained flexible, particularly during crises, when the Executive Branch tends to expand the interpretive scope of its constitutional authority.

3.2 Historical precedents and limits of legislative oversight

The tension between the Executive Branch and Congress regarding the use of force is not a recent phenomenon but rather a structural constant within U.S. institutional practice.

Since the Vietnam War, the dominant pattern has been the continuation of military operations without formal declarations of war, sustained through broad authorizations and legislative funding. In this context, congressional oversight has functioned more as a political mechanism than as a strict legal limitation.

The War Powers Resolution sought to correct this imbalance, but its implementation has been inconsistent. In 2011, during the intervention in Libya, the Executive Branch argued that the operations did not constitute “hostilities” in the strict legal sense of the term, thereby avoiding activation of the 60-day limitation. In Yemen (2019), congressional attempts to restrict military support were neutralized through presidential vetoes.

Likewise, the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) significantly expanded

executive discretion, becoming a persistent legal basis for military operations without precise geographic or temporal limitations.

Taken together, these precedents reflect a structural pattern: Congress retains oversight capacity, but the effective conduct of conflict tends to shift toward the Executive Branch, while legislative control increasingly depends on indirect mechanisms, particularly budgetary oversight.

3.3 The structural contradiction: dual narrative and budgetary control

Contemporary practice introduces a more complex evolution of the previous pattern, characterized by the coexistence of divergent institutional interpretations regarding the existence and continuity of hostilities.

In the recent case involving Iran, the President of the United States submitted a formal notification to Congress on May 1, 2026, in compliance with the War Powers Resolution of 1973. In that communication, the Executive argued that the hostilities initiated on February 28, 2026, had “ended” following the establishment of a ceasefire on April 7, contending that this condition altered the application of the 60-day limit established by law (Reuters, 2026; The Wall Street Journal, 2026; Associated Press, 2026).

This interpretation carries legal significance because the definition of “hostilities” determines both the initiation and continuity of the legal time calculation.

Simultaneously, the Department of Defense maintained that the ceasefire interrupted the time count, thereby allowing continued military deployment without additional legislative authorization, generating institutional controversy and legal debate within Congress (The Washington Post, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

At the same time, the Department continued executing budgetary allocations and maintaining operational military deployment in the region, demonstrating the persistence of active capabilities despite the formal

declaration that the conflict had ended (Congressional Budget Documentation, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

This coexistence gave rise to a dual institutional narrative:

- a political-legal narrative, advanced by the White House, declaring the end of hostilities and reinterpreting the framework of the WPR;
- and an operational-budgetary narrative, sustained by the Department of Defense, maintaining the functional continuity of the military effort.

3.4 Role of the National Security Council (NSC)

The National Security Council (NSC) constitutes the principal strategic coordination body within the U.S. Executive Branch in matters of national security and foreign policy. Its function is to advise the President through the integration of military, diplomatic, intelligence, and homeland security policies, coordinating the participation of multiple agencies and departments within the federal government.

Institutionally, the NSC brings together the President, the Vice President, and senior executive officials, including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence, along with other advisors convened depending on the nature of the crisis. However, its real significance derives not only from its formal composition but from its role as the central mechanism articulating the decision-making process during conflict or strategic risk scenarios.

In practice, the NSC functions as the space where military assessments, intelligence analyses, diplomatic considerations, economic risks, and domestic political calculations converge before presidential decisions are made. This means that the NSC serves as the meeting point where different state agencies present assessments that may

be partially contradictory regarding the same conflict, requiring the structuring of options and priorities before presidential action.

Its principal function is not to replace presidential authority, but to structure available options, coordinate interagency positions, and reduce the risk of fragmented responses within the state apparatus. In practical terms, this means the NSC acts as an institutional filter that organizes which alternatives effectively reach the President and how they are presented.

Various studies by the Congressional Research Service and the Belfer Center have noted that the NSC operates primarily as an interinstitutional integration mechanism rather than as an operational or military command body.

This function becomes especially relevant in scenarios of war or complex international crises, where presidential decisions depend on information simultaneously produced by multiple actors with differing interests, institutional cultures, and priorities. The Department of State may prioritize diplomatic stability and international alliances; the Pentagon, operational viability and deterrence capability; while intelligence agencies tend to focus on threat assessment and risk scenarios. The NSC acts precisely as the mechanism responsible for integrating these partially divergent perspectives into a coherent strategic formulation process.

Nevertheless, the functioning of the NSC depends largely on presidential leadership style and on the political influence of the National Security Advisor. Unlike other senior cabinet officials, the National Security Advisor operates directly from the White House and maintains permanent and direct access to the President, which has historically made this figure one of the most influential actors within the foreign policy and national security decision-making process. When this figure holds greater political weight, the decision-making process may become faster and more direct, reducing interagency mediation between agencies and the President.

Various analyses by the Council on Foreign Relations and studies on the institutional evolution of the NSC indicate that, depending on the administration, the Council may function either as a relatively plural deliberative forum or as a highly centralized structure organized around the presidential vision.

In the current administration, this dynamic acquires particular relevance because the positions of Secretary of State and interim National Security Advisor — key figures in the coordination of the National Security Council — are simultaneously held by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. This means that the same individual participates both in the conduct of foreign policy and in the coordination of the national security process within the NSC. In practical terms, this concentration may accelerate decision-making during crises, but it may also reduce the space for formal debate among agencies with differing perspectives.

In the context of the conflict with Iran, reports from Reuters, The Wall Street Journal, and other international media outlets indicated the existence of significant disagreements within the U.S. security apparatus regarding the scope of military pressure, the risk of regional escalation, and the viability of parallel diplomatic solutions. In practice, these differences are reflected in debates concerning the intensity of military operations, the pace of escalation, and the possibility of maintaining open diplomatic channels simultaneously.

These divergences reflect a structural characteristic of the NSC: its capacity to coordinate strategic debate does not necessarily guarantee political consensus or decisional uniformity within the Executive Branch.

The Iranian case further demonstrates that the NSC does not function solely as a reactive body in response to military crises, but also as a space for continuous evaluation regarding political sustainability, regional stability, international alliances, and public perception of the conflict. In this sense, its role is not

limited to recommending military options, but rather to integrating diplomatic, economic, energy, and political dimensions into the broader process of executive strategic formulation.

3.5 Interaction between political leadership, defense, and intelligence

Decision-making regarding war involves interaction among three functional levels: political leadership, the intelligence community, and the defense structure.

Under ideal conditions, this interaction allows decisions to be based on technical information, strategic assessment, and coordinated operational capability. However, in situations of high strategic pressure, tensions may emerge from differing interpretations of risk, urgency, or the nature of the threat.

These tensions do not constitute anomalies within the system but rather inherent expressions of the coexistence of distinct institutional logics: political leadership operates according to strategic decision-making criteria; intelligence operates under standards of evidence and probability; and defense operates according to operational feasibility criteria.

Authors such as Graham Allison have argued that, in contexts of international crisis, foreign policy and security decisions rarely respond to a purely rational and centralized model, but rather to processes of negotiation, bureaucratic competition, and interaction among organizations with differing priorities and perceptions.

Consequently, the decision-making process is configured less as a linear hierarchical chain and more as a space of institutional interaction among interdependent functional levels.

3.6 Tensions between legality, operational speed, and democratic oversight (application to the scenario surrounding Iran)

The U.S. decision-making system regarding the use of force operates under a permanent

tension between constitutional legality, operational responsiveness, and congressional political oversight. Structurally, this tension reflects the difficulty of balancing rapid decision-making during international crises with formal mechanisms of democratic supervision.

In the case of Iran, these tensions are manifested not only through activation of the War Powers Resolution framework, but also through the construction of strategic narratives of justification within the Executive Branch itself. These narratives are not uniform, but may vary depending on the agency or institutional actor articulating them, introducing an additional layer of complexity into public interpretation of the decision.

In this context, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who as noted simultaneously performs key functions in the coordination of the National Security Council, stated that U.S. action was allegedly linked to the need to anticipate a possible Israeli offensive against Iran (Associated Press, 2025). This formulation does not constitute a legal explanation for the action, but rather a strategic narrative aimed at justifying the decision in terms of preventing regional escalation.

However, this is not the only narrative present within the institutional system. Simultaneously, other interpretations within the security apparatus tend to emphasize different elements, such as direct deterrence against Iran, the protection of regional allies, or the need to respond to specific threats against U.S. interests. The coexistence of these narratives reflects the fragmented nature of the decision-making process regarding the use of force.

This plurality of interpretations does not formally alter the applicable legal framework, but it does influence the construction of political legitimacy surrounding the decision and the way it is perceived both domestically and internationally.

Institutional and strategic consequences:

At the domestic level, this dynamic introduces tensions among the Executive Branch, Congress, and national security agencies, insofar as interpretation of the legal framework depends not exclusively on fixed norms but also on the dominant narrative at each phase of the conflict. In practical terms, this may generate zones of ambiguity regarding legislative oversight and interagency coordination.

At the external level, particularly in the perception of strategic allies, the existence of multiple narratives may increase uncertainty regarding the coherence of the U.S. decision-making process. This is not uncertainty regarding the formal legality of the action, but rather regarding its strategic predictability and future evolution.

In the case of the adversary, particularly Iran, this coexistence of narratives may be interpreted as a margin of strategic ambiguity within the U.S. decision-making system, introducing additional variables into calculations of deterrence and response.

At a structural level, these dynamics reinforce a tendency toward expansion of the Executive Branch's interpretive space during crises, in which operational speed and the construction of political legitimacy tend to interact more closely than under conditions of normal institutional functioning.

4. Intelligence and the construction of strategic knowledge

4.1 The function of intelligence in contexts of war

Intelligence constitutes one of the fundamental pillars in the conduct of contemporary warfare, particularly in contexts of high strategic uncertainty. Its primary function is to reduce uncertainty, identify adversary capabilities, anticipate threats, and provide analytical inputs for decision-making at the highest levels of political and military power.

However, its role is not limited to information collection. In practice, intelligence does not

merely describe reality; it also contributes to shaping how that reality is interpreted by decision-makers. In this sense, it operates not only as a technical input, but also as an element that influences the construction of the strategic framework within which what constitutes a threat and what level of response is required are defined.

Operationally, intelligence reports directly influence decisions regarding military escalation, target selection, assessment of retaliation risks, and the determination of the appropriate timing for action. In crisis situations, these assessments may accelerate or constrain political decisions depending on the perceived level of certainty regarding the adversary's intentions.

Robert Jervis has argued that one of the central problems of intelligence in international politics is that states do not respond solely to objective facts, but rather to interpretations of those facts filtered through perceptions, prior assumptions, and levels of institutional trust. In this sense, intelligence does not eliminate uncertainty; rather, it structures it within parameters that are manageable for decision-making.

In the case of the United States, Richard Betts has emphasized that strategic intelligence performs a dual function: on the one hand, it seeks to reduce the risk of strategic surprise; on the other, it may, in certain cases, reinforce politically predisposed decisions by providing interpretive frameworks that make them more plausible within the decision-making process.

In contexts such as the conflict with Iran, this dimension becomes particularly relevant, as intelligence assessments not only provide information on military capabilities or adversary intentions, but also shape perceptions of the immediacy of threats, thereby directly affecting the speed and intensity of the state's response.

At this point, intelligence becomes integrated with other mechanisms of the decision-making process, particularly the National

Security Council (NSC), where these inputs are processed alongside diplomatic, military, and political assessments, forming part of a broader architecture of executive strategic decision-making.

4.2 The role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA)

Within the U.S. national security system, the production of strategic intelligence is carried out by several specialized agencies, among which the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA) are particularly prominent.

The CIA focuses on the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence, including human intelligence and covert operations. In practice, this involves informant networks, in-country political analysis, and direct assessment of state and non-state actors in strategically relevant regions such as the Middle East and Iran.

The NSA, in turn, specializes in signals intelligence, particularly the interception and analysis of electronic communications. This includes monitoring communication patterns, digital activity, and information flows that may reveal military movements, attack preparations, or coordination among hostile actors.

In scenarios such as the conflict with Iran, both agencies operate in a complementary manner: the CIA provides assessments of political intentions and on-the-ground dynamics, while the NSA supplies technical and operational indicators regarding military activity and potential escalation preparations.

Both agencies are part of the intelligence community, whose assessments are integrated into analytical products intended for political leadership, such as the Presidential Daily Brief. This institutional design aims to ensure that decision-making is informed by multidimensional and technically assessed information, although its incorporation into the political process is neither automatic nor linear.

4.3 Production, interpretation, and limits of intelligence

The intelligence production process involves several stages: collection, processing, analysis, and interpretation. Each of these stages introduces margins of uncertainty that cannot be fully eliminated.

Intelligence does not produce absolute certainty, but rather probabilistic estimates based on incomplete information. Its value depends both on the quality of the data and on the analytical frameworks used to interpret it.

Scholars such as Robert Jervis have emphasized that the perception of international threats is shaped by pre-existing cognitive frameworks, historical experiences, and institutional assumptions that influence how actors process available information.

The specialized literature has identified recurring risks in this process, including cognitive biases, institutional pressure, and the tendency to fit information to pre-existing expectations. These risks tend to intensify in crisis contexts, where urgency reduces verification margins.

A widely documented example is the 2003 Iraq case, where intelligence assessments regarding weapons of mass destruction were later questioned, highlighting the tensions between information, interpretation, and political decision-making (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004; The New York Times, 2004).

4.4 Uncertainty, risk, and decision-making under pressure

In wartime contexts, intelligence operates under conditions of structural uncertainty. Information is often incomplete, ambiguous, or contradictory, and decisions must be made under time pressure.

In this environment, the relationship between intelligence and decision-making is not linear. Intelligence informs but does not determine. The final decision incorporates political, strategic, and perceptual factors that may

alter the relative weight of technical assessments.

Scholars such as Daniel Kahneman and Robert Jervis have noted that, under high-pressure conditions, decision-making processes are influenced by cognitive biases, selective risk perception, and pre-existing interpretive frameworks.

This phenomenon can be observed in various contemporary cases where political urgency and operational pressure have shaped how intelligence information is interpreted, prioritized, or incorporated into decision-making processes.

4.5 Reading of the scenario surrounding Iran

Within this framework of structural uncertainty, the recent case involving Iran provides a particularly illustrative example of these dynamics.

Assessments presented before the United States Congress by the Director of National Intelligence indicated that there was no evidence that Iran was actively developing a nuclear weapon or that it had reactivated its suspended program dating back to 2003 (Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

This element was later reintroduced into public debate following statements by Joe Kent, then Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who resigned in protest over the war and argued that Iran did not represent an imminent threat to the United States (BBC News Mundo, 2026; AP, 2026).

Kent further stated that the decision to enter into conflict was influenced by external pressures linked to allied actors, particularly Israel, reopening the debate on the degree of autonomy in defining strategic threats within the U.S. decision-making process.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that intelligence should not be understood as a neutral mechanism for transmitting information, but rather as part of a broader process of constructing strategic knowledge.

As seen both in the Iraq case and in the recent dynamics surrounding Iran, the relationship between intelligence and political decision-making is mediated by processes of interpretation, selection, and, at times, open contestation over the definition of threat.

This reinforces the idea that, in contemporary warfare, the construction of threat is not merely the result of technical analysis, but of a complex interaction between knowledge, power, and strategy.

5. Strategic coherence and the definition of objectives

5.1 Relationship between ends, means, and strategic coherence

In classical strategic theory, the relationship between ends, means, and ways of action constitutes the core of strategic coherence. From Carl von Clausewitz to contemporary strategic approaches, it has been argued that strategic clarity is essential to guide military action, prevent operational drift, and sustain long-term efforts.

In contemporary practice, however, strategic objectives do not function as fixed guidelines, but rather as frameworks that are adjusted as the conflict evolves. This adjustment is not necessarily the result of planning failures, but rather of the simultaneous pressure of political, military, and international factors.

The recent dynamic surrounding Iran illustrates this phenomenon clearly. Throughout the course of the conflict, U.S. political leadership has relied on different justifications for the use of force. At different moments, President Donald Trump has framed the action as necessary to contain an alleged nuclear threat, to respond to hostile actions attributed to Iran, and to address broader regional stability concerns as well as strategic interests linked to energy resources (Reuters, 2025; Financial Times, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026).

These variations are not merely rhetorical. They directly affect how strategic objectives are defined. When justifications change, what

constitutes a successful outcome is also implicitly or explicitly modified.

From a strategic perspective, this should not be interpreted solely as inconsistency, but rather as a structural difficulty in maintaining a single coherent objective in environments where political and operational conditions evolve simultaneously.

In this sense, strategic coherence depends not only on the initial definition of objectives, but also on the ability to maintain functional alignment between what is being pursued, the means available, and the political justification sustaining action over time.

5.2 The operational function of objectives in wartime contexts

In conflict environments, strategic objectives perform three main functions: they guide military planning, structure the political legitimacy of the use of force, and communicate signals to both domestic and external audiences.

When these objectives are clear and relatively stable, they facilitate coordination between political leadership, the intelligence community, and the military establishment. However, when they are modified or expanded during the course of a conflict, this alignment begins to weaken.

A useful illustration helps clarify this point: if a military operation begins with the objective of neutralizing a specific threat but is later expanded to include broader goals—such as regional stability or political pressure on an adversary—it becomes increasingly difficult to define clear criteria for assessing mission success.

This phenomenon has been widely described in strategic studies as “mission creep,” a concept used to explain the gradual expansion of objectives in military operations beyond their original scope. Scholars such as Colin S. Gray and Lawrence Freedman have argued that in prolonged conflicts, the continuous redefinition of objectives can generate misalignment between political strategy,

military capacity, and public expectations, making it difficult to define strategic success. Cases such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq illustrate how the progressive expansion of military and political goals tends to increase the costs of conflict while eroding both operational clarity and political legitimacy.

This dynamic can be observed in contemporary scenarios where justifications for the use of force have shifted over time, incorporating additional strategic elements that further complicate the definition of success.

5.3 Strategic ambiguity as both a problem and an instrument of execution

Strategic literature has emphasized that ambiguity in the definition of objectives is not a neutral condition. Scholars such as Barry Posen have warned that lack of clarity can generate misalignment between military planning and political direction, while Thomas Schelling has underscored the importance of consistency in strategic communication.

However, in practice, ambiguity also serves an operational function. It allows political leadership to preserve flexibility, adapt to changing environments, and avoid rigid commitments that could limit strategic maneuverability.

This dynamic can be observed in recent international security contexts, where justifications for the use of force have varied depending on circumstances. In the case of the Iran-related dynamic, as noted earlier, U.S. political leadership has alternated between framing the conflict in terms of nuclear containment, responses to hostile actions, and broader considerations related to regional stability and strategic energy interests (Reuters, 2025; Financial Times, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026).

The problem arises when such ambiguity ceases to be functional and begins to generate cumulative effects. At that point, it shifts from being a tool of flexibility to becoming a source of institutional misalignment and strategic uncertainty.

From the perspective of public opinion, this is often perceived as inconsistency. From a systemic perspective, however, it reflects the difficulty of sustaining a coherent strategy in highly volatile environments.

5.4 Cumulative effects on systemic coherence

The impact of strategic ambiguity is not immediate but progressive. As objectives are redefined or expanded, the system begins to experience three main effects.

First, coordination between intelligence, military planning, and political leadership becomes more difficult, as each actor may operate with different interpretations of the objective.

Second, it becomes increasingly complex to assess success or failure in military operations, since the absence of stable criteria makes it difficult to define conditions for continuation or termination of the conflict.

Third, strategic communication toward external actors lose consistency. Allies and adversaries receive mixed signals, increasing interpretive uncertainty and, consequently, the risk of miscalculation.

These dynamics have been analyzed in political systems and international relations literature as a problem of systemic coherence and feedback effects, where accumulated decisions generate non-linear consequences for system stability, as described by David Easton in his systems theory approach.

These effects do not operate in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another, generating an increasingly complex environment for decision-making.

5.5 The Iran case as an illustration of structural tension

The recent scenario surrounding Iran illustrates the tension between multiple decision-making levels, political pressures, and international dynamics, showing how strategic coherence can be affected in highly complex environments.

Throughout the conflict, different frames of justification and threat assessment have coexisted, along with divergences among institutional actors.

What is analytically relevant is not merely the existence of these differences—which are expected in complex systems—but their impact on the ability to maintain a sustained strategic direction.

These variations may be interpreted externally as inconsistency. However, from an analytical perspective, they reflect a structural tension: the difficulty of sustaining a single objective when multiple institutional layers and concurrent dynamics are involved.

Strategic coherence, in analytical terms, should not be understood as the existence of perfectly stable objectives, but rather as the ability to maintain functional alignment between ends, means, and execution over time.

The analysis shows that this coherence is dynamic and permanently exposed to tension. While ambiguity may function as a source of flexibility, it can also generate cumulative costs that affect the conduct of the conflict.

The Iran case demonstrates that the problem does not lie in adjustments to objectives themselves, but in the difficulty of managing them without undermining strategic clarity, institutional coordination, and the external perception of the conflict.

In this sense, strategic coherence is not a fixed condition, but a dynamic equilibrium that must be continuously maintained under conditions of political and military pressure.

6. Military execution and the chain of command

6.1 Role of the Department of Defense

The execution of war in the United States falls primarily under the Department of Defense (DoD), which is responsible for translating political-level decisions into operational planning and military conduct. Under the authority of the President as Commander in

Chief, the system is structured through the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the United States Combatant Commands.

This design seeks to ensure that political decisions can be translated into coordinated and operationally feasible military actions. In practical terms, this means that the DoD does not merely execute orders, but rather transforms broad political objectives into concrete military plans, resource allocation, force deployment, and the definition of escalation or containment scenarios.

However, this translation is neither automatic nor mechanical. It depends on the clarity of strategic objectives, the stability of political leadership, and the coherence among the different agencies involved.

In practice, when strategic objectives are clear and stable, the system operates with greater cohesion and faster response capacity. But when variations emerge in political justifications, shifts in conflict narratives, or ambiguous signals from the executive level, the execution chain becomes more complex, generating continuous operational adjustments within the Pentagon itself.

In scenarios such as the conflict with Iran, this dimension becomes particularly relevant, as the DoD not only faces the conduct of military operations in a high-intensity technological environment, but also the need to adapt military planning to political decisions that may simultaneously incorporate multiple objectives, such as deterrence, regional containment, protection of allies, or escalation management.

6.2 Changes in the chain of command and institutional reconfiguration

Armed conflicts, particularly those unfolding under conditions of high political and strategic pressure, often generate internal transformations within defense and national security systems. These processes may manifest through doctrinal adjustments, operational modifications, redistribution of institutional responsibilities, or changes in key

positions within the military chain of command and the state security apparatus.

In wartime or escalation contexts, differences between strategic assessment, political leadership, and operational execution may generate tensions within decision-making structures. As a consequence, it is not unusual for dismissals, resignations, replacements, or institutional reconfiguration processes to occur, aimed at strengthening political control, correcting strategic disagreements, or adapting the defense apparatus to new conflict priorities.

In the United States, these dynamics acquire additional complexity due to the interaction between civilian authority, a professional military structure, intelligence agencies, and political oversight mechanisms. The conduct of war depends not only on operational capabilities, but also on coherence between political leadership, the military apparatus, and the intelligence community.

The recent dynamic surrounding Iran allows us to observe how different levels of war decision-making interact: strategic evaluation, political-institutional leadership, and military execution.

From an analytical perspective, this scenario not only illustrates an armed conflict, but also the structural tensions of the U.S. national security system, where the White House, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community converge.

In this context, various international reports have documented significant changes in the leadership structure of the U.S. defense apparatus during the escalation with Iran, including departures, replacements, and reassignments in senior positions within the military chain of command (CNN Español, 2026; BBC Mundo, 2026; The Washington Post, 2026; The Defense Post, 2026).

These movements have affected different levels of the system, from strategic command structures to operational leadership and interagency coordination functions. Taken together, specialized sources have

interpreted them as part of a broader process of military leadership reconfiguration in a context of high operational sensitivity (The Defense Post, 2026).

Among the most relevant cases reported in open sources are:

The departure of Secretary of the Navy John C. Phelan within the framework of institutional adjustments during the escalation of the conflict.

The departure of General Randy George, Chief of Staff of the Army, one of the central positions in ground-force planning and operations.

The departure of General Charles "CQ" Brown Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest-ranking military officer in the advisory structure to the President.

The early departure of Admiral Alvin Holsey, linked to regional operations and strategic commands outside the continental United States.

The departure of General Jon Harrison, serving in coordination functions within the Navy structure.

Beyond the formal designation of each case—dismissal, retirement, or resignation—the analytically relevant aspect is the simultaneity of these changes within the chain of command during an active military operation. This dynamic introduces an additional variable of institutional instability in the conduct of the conflict.

From a strategic perspective, this phenomenon should not be interpreted as a series of isolated administrative events, but rather as an accumulative process of military leadership adjustment under conditions of heightened geopolitical tension.

This process generates effects at three main levels.

First, it affects internal cohesion within the Department of Defense by altering the continuity of the chain of command and

reducing organizational stability at a moment of high operational sensitivity.

Second, it impacts the decision-making process, insofar as accelerated leadership rotation may modify internal advisory dynamics, reduce continuity in strategic debate, and alter the balance between civilian and military levels.

Third, it affects the international credibility of U.S. defense policy, particularly in the perception of strategic allies such as NATO members, as well as in the interpretation made by adversaries regarding the stability and predictability of military leadership.

In the specific case of the Iran dynamic, these elements acquire additional relevance. U.S. decision-making does not occur in isolation, but under simultaneous conditions of operational pressure, strategic uncertainty, and high political exposure.

In this context, changes in military leadership are not perceived solely as internal administrative decisions, but also as strategic signals within the development of the conflict.

From the perspective of deterrence theory, leadership consistency and chain-of-command stability are central elements in the credibility of signals sent to adversaries. In its classical formulation, deterrence logic holds that credibility depends not only on military capability, but also on the perception of coherent and predictable decision-making. In practical terms, it is not enough to possess military power: the adversary must perceive a clear and stable political will to use it under certain conditions.

In this sense, the institutional stability of the U.S. military apparatus becomes an indirect component of deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Iran, as any perception of discontinuity or accelerated adjustment in the chain of command may be interpreted as a realignment of priorities or as increased uncertainty about the trajectory of the conflict.

Consequently, the analysis of this context should not be limited to the description of administrative changes, but rather understood as part of a broader process of war governance, in which institutional stability, decision-making, and strategic perception are deeply interconnected.

6.3 Tensions between political leadership, strategic language, and armed forces

In contemporary conflicts, the relationship between political leadership and military structures is not limited to the issuance of formal orders. The language used by political authorities is an active part of the strategic process, as it contributes to shaping threat perceptions, legitimacy thresholds, escalation limits, and political objectives of the conflict.

The literature on civil-military relations and strategic studies has shown that, in crisis contexts, public statements by leadership can directly influence the perception of allies, adversaries, armed forces, and public opinion. Consequently, political discourse ceases to be purely communicational and becomes a strategic instrument with operational consequences.

Historian and military analyst Lawrence Freedman argues that in contemporary warfare, political narrative is an integral part of strategy, since public perceptions can influence both internal legitimacy and the actual capacity to sustain prolonged military operations. From this perspective, political language does not merely accompany war: it actively helps structure it.

This dynamic becomes particularly relevant when political language changes rapidly, incorporates emotional elements, or introduces ambiguous or shifting objectives. In such cases, tensions may arise between political-discursive rationality and military operational logic, particularly when armed forces require clarity, predictability, and precise definition of objectives.

Samuel P. Huntington already warned in his studies on civil-military relations that one of the main risks in high-tension environments is

the loss of balance between civilian control and military professionalism. When short-term political priorities begin to affect strategic coherence, the risk of institutional friction and unintended conflict expansion increases.

In democratic systems, this relationship becomes especially sensitive due to the coexistence of multiple power centers, institutional oversight mechanisms, and constant public and media scrutiny. War conduct does not depend solely on military capacity, but also on coherence between political leadership, strategic communication, and operational execution.

In the recent Iran-related dynamic, various international reports have documented highly confrontational statements by U.S. political leadership, including expressions broadcast in televised speeches and official social media platforms (CNN Español, 2026; DW, 2026).

From a strategic standpoint, such statements are not neutral. They function as signals interpreted both by external actors and by the internal military structure.

In deterrence terms, hyperbolic or highly coercive language may aim to signal political determination. However, it can also generate unintended effects, such as interpretive uncertainty or difficulties in alignment between political and military levels.

In the context of the Iran conflict, international reporting has also documented highly polarized public statements by U.S. political leadership, as well as visible responses from international actors, including the Vatican, expanding the debate on the moral dimension of the conflict (El País, 2026; Associated Press, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

These dynamics go beyond diplomacy and directly affect how the conduct of the conflict is interpreted, both within the state apparatus and in the international system.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant for military execution because political language does not operate separately from the

operational system. Armed forces and mid-level commanders interpret these signals within planning and execution processes, which may influence target prioritization, escalation perception, and tactical adjustments in real time. In this sense, political language acquires a strategic function.

During a primetime televised address in early April 2026, President Trump stated that the United States was on track to achieve its military objectives and would take Iran “back to the Stone Age” (CNN Español, 2026).

In another message posted on April 7 via Truth Social, the President issued an ultimatum warning that “an entire civilization will die tonight” if the Iranian regime did not comply with its demands before midnight (DW, 2026).

These statements should not be interpreted solely as political rhetoric, but as part of the communicational environment surrounding military execution. Political language not only describes the conflict, but also contributes to defining its perception, its boundaries, and its level of escalation.

In parallel, several academic analyses have suggested that the use of hyperbolic or coercive expressions may function as a signaling mechanism in deterrence contexts, although it may also generate interpretive uncertainty among allies and military structures (IRI-UNLP, 2026).

6.4 Institutional dimension and internal tensions within the military apparatus

In contemporary conflicts, tensions within the military apparatus are not limited to operational, hierarchical, or coordination issues. In high political polarization or prolonged conflicts, differences may also arise regarding strategic interpretations of the war, threat definitions, political language used to justify the conflict, and even symbolic or ideological frameworks surrounding military conduct.

The literature on civil-military relations has emphasized that modern armed forces

require high levels of institutional cohesion and professional neutrality to function effectively within democratic systems. Samuel P. Huntington argued that the stability of civil-military relations depends largely on maintaining a functional separation between political leadership and military professionalism, avoiding the transformation of the military into a space of ideological fragmentation or internal political dispute.

In wartime settings, these tensions may intensify when the conflict expands beyond strictly strategic objectives and acquires identity-based, emotional, or ideological dimensions. In such contexts, the risks of institutional friction, internal fatigue, and questions about coherence in political and military leadership increase.

Several security analysts have further warned that when political narratives incorporate religious, civilizational, or morally absolute components, wars become more difficult to limit politically, since the conflict is no longer framed as a strategic dispute but as an existential confrontation.

In the Iran conflict context, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) has reported to the U.S. Congress concerns within segments of the armed forces regarding the incorporation of symbolic frameworks or religious interpretations in environments associated with military command (MRFF, 2026).

These allegations have drawn congressional attention and scrutiny regarding their scope within operational environments.

According to these claims, some military personnel have expressed concern over the presence of moralizing narratives or eschatological references in internal communications or operational briefings, where the conflict may be framed in non-strategic terms.

Beyond the verification of individual testimonies, the analytically relevant issue is not the specific content of these expressions,

but their potential impact on institutional cohesion and war conduct.

This type of dynamic may affect internal cohesion as different organizational levels begin to interpret the mission's purpose differently.

At the same time, it introduces variations in strategic discipline, as order execution may be influenced by perceptions of the legitimacy of the objective.

Finally, it may also weaken the coherence of the institutional message outwardly, affecting how allies and adversaries interpret the nature of the conflict.

In this sense, the institutional dimension is not a secondary element of conflict, but a component that directly affects how war is planned, executed, and sustained over time.

Contemporary warfare does not depend solely on material capabilities, but also on interpretive stability within the very structures that conduct it.

6.5 Effects on strategic coherence and perception of the conflict

In contemporary conflicts, strategic coherence depends not only on military superiority or operational capacity. It also depends on consistency between political discourse, institutional structure, strategic objectives, and signals sent to allies, adversaries, and public opinion.

Thomas Schelling argued that, in crisis environments, strategic credibility is built less through isolated statements than through the cumulative perception of coherence between political intent and state behavior. Similarly, Lawrence Freedman suggests that modern warfare is also a competition of interpretation, where perceptions of stability, control, and strategic rationality can be as influential as material military capabilities.

From this perspective, frequent changes in the chain of command, public redefinitions of political objectives, or contradictions between official discourse and technical assessments are not merely communicational episodes.

Taken together, they can alter the perception of strategic coherence and generate uncertainty both inside and outside the security structure.

The importance of this phenomenon lies in its cumulative effects across different levels of the conflict. Domestically, it may increase tensions between political leadership, the military apparatus, and intelligence agencies. Internationally, it may affect allied confidence, alter adversary calculations, and reduce predictability of state behavior.

Authors such as Robert Jervis have also noted that, in high-tension environments, perceptions of uncertainty or improvisation can increase the risk of miscalculation, especially when actors interpret contradictory signals regarding limits, intentions, or escalation thresholds.

The recent Iran-related dynamic illustrates these tensions clearly. Changes in key positions within the national security structure, variations in public narratives about conflict objectives, and visible differences between intelligence assessments and political statements reflect an environment in which multiple decision-making layers interact simultaneously under strategic pressure.

In this context, war ceases to appear as a linear sequence of rational decisions and becomes a system permanently exposed to political, institutional, informational, and symbolic tensions. Precisely for this reason, strategic stability in the twenty-first century depends not only on the capacity to project military force, but also on the ability to maintain coherence between political power, institutional conduct, and public perception of the conflict.

7. Institutional tensions in war contexts

7.1 Stability vs. Leadership Reconfiguration

As observed in the previous sections, contemporary warfare does not depend solely on military capabilities or isolated operational

decisions, but rather on the ability of the political and security system to maintain strategic coherence under conditions of pressure, uncertainty, and constant public exposure. Within this framework, leadership stability acquires central importance.

In wartime contexts, institutional continuity facilitates coordination among political, military, and intelligence levels, allows for the maintenance of relatively consistent strategic objectives, and contributes to projecting predictability both within the state apparatus and toward allies and adversaries. For this reason, leadership stability is not merely an administrative element, but a component of the state's strategic credibility.

However, in scenarios of high geopolitical pressure, systems of war governance often undergo processes of adjustment or institutional reconfiguration. These changes, as previously noted, may respond to strategic disagreements, internal political tensions, attempts to strengthen political control over the conflict, or operational needs derived from the evolving dynamics of war itself.

In the case of the United States, where conflict management simultaneously involves the White House, the Department of Defense (DoD), the intelligence community, and military command structures, any significant modification in key positions inevitably acquires a political and strategic dimension.

What is relevant, as evidenced in the recent dynamics related to Iran, is not only the existence of changes in leadership structures—something relatively frequent in periods of crisis—but also the cumulative effect these may generate on the perception of coherence within the decision-making system.

Henry Kissinger warned that the strategic stability of a major power depends largely on its ability to project continuity and clarity in political leadership, even amid uncertain environments. When that perception begins to weaken, the risk increases that allies, adversaries, and even internal actors will

interpret the signals of leadership in a fragmented or contradictory manner.

This is precisely where one of the most sensitive effects of institutional reconfiguration processes in wartime emerges: the progressive deterioration of strategic predictability. When changes accumulate in key positions, variations in political priorities emerge, and constant redefinitions of strategic discourse occur, the system may begin to project an image of improvisation or lack of internal consensus.

The greatest damage does not necessarily occur at the immediate operational level, but rather in the erosion of trust regarding the state's capacity to sustain a consistent strategic direction over time. In practical terms, this may simultaneously affect the confidence of allies, the calculations of adversaries, bureaucratic-military cohesion, and public perception regarding the legitimacy and viability of the conflict.

The recent dynamics concerning Iran clearly illustrate this phenomenon: a complex interaction between political leadership, the military apparatus, the intelligence community, and the informational environment, where internal tensions cease to be perceived as isolated episodes and become a visible part of the conflict itself.

Consequently, institutional stability in wartime should not be understood merely as the permanence of positions or bureaucratic continuity. Its real significance lies in the capacity to preserve strategic coherence, political predictability, and systemic trust under conditions of high international tension.

7.2 Strategic Impact of Institutional Decisions in Wartime

As previously noted in the analysis of changes, removals, and reconfigurations within military leadership and national security structures, institutional decisions taken during a conflict do not constitute merely internal administrative adjustments. In wartime

contexts, these decisions inevitably acquire a strategic dimension.

However, this phenomenon is not limited to changes in military command structures. It may also manifest through replacements in national security teams, visible divergences between intelligence agencies and political leadership, modifications in interagency coordination mechanisms, changes in official spokespersons, redefinitions of strategic objectives, or variations in the level of participation of certain actors within the decision-making process.

Lawrence Freedman argues that contemporary strategy does not depend solely on military operations, but also on the leadership's ability to project coherence, continuity, and political control in environments of uncertainty. From this perspective, institutional decisions become an active component of the conflict's strategic architecture.

For this reason, the impact of these decisions extends far beyond the bureaucratic level. Their strategic relevance lies in the signals they transmit to different internal and external actors.

Among these signals may be found:

- perceptions of disagreement between civilian authorities and military leadership;
- doubts regarding the clarity of conflict objectives;
- tensions between technical intelligence assessments and political statements;
- attempts at centralization or concentration of decision-making;
- changes in the administration's strategic priorities;
- or difficulties in maintaining a consistent narrative toward public opinion and allies.

In the case of the United States, war governance operates through an institutional architecture distributed among the White House, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the intelligence community. This implies that decisions are not confined to the internal sphere but acquire value as strategic signals interpreted in real time by allies and adversaries, particularly in contexts of crisis or military escalation.

The recent dynamics surrounding Iran allow precisely this phenomenon to be observed. Public divergences between intelligence reports and political statements regarding the Iranian nuclear threat, changes in key national security positions, variations in the narrative regarding the objectives of the conflict, and the increasingly confrontational language used at certain moments have projected signals of internal tension and adjustment within the strategic decision-making system itself.

The main risk of these dynamics does not lie solely in their immediate operational impact, but in the cumulative effect they produce on the perception of the state's strategic coherence. When institutional signals begin to be perceived as contradictory or unstable, uncertainty increases regarding the political direction of the conflict, and the state's ability to project predictability, control, and strategic stability is weakened both domestically and internationally.

7.3 Internal and External Signals Toward Allies and Adversaries

Expanding on the previous discussion, in wartime contexts institutional decisions also function as signals. These signals operate on two levels:

Internal, affecting troop morale, confidence in leadership, and institutional cohesion.

External, influencing how allies and adversaries interpret the strategic situation.

From the deterrence theory discussed earlier, Thomas C. Schelling emphasizes credibility and consistency as the fundamental signals

shaping adversary behavior. When a state projects ambiguous or contradictory messages, uncertainty increases within the strategic interaction.

Under these conditions, changes in command structures and institutional governance do not only produce internal administrative effects, but also acquire interpretative value within the international system. Their impact depends not only on the organizational change itself, but on how such changes are perceived in relation to political context, timing, and the accompanying strategic narrative.

In this sense, the institutional transformations described above must also be understood as part of a process of strategic communication. In active conflict scenarios, institutional information ceases to be merely administrative and becomes part of the strategic environment of war.

The current context surrounding the United States–Iran dynamic allows us to observe how different levels of the war decision-making process interact: strategic assessment, political-institutional leadership, and military execution. Analytically, this case not only illustrates an armed conflict scenario but also the structural tensions of the U.S. national security system, where the White House, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community converge.

From this deterrence perspective, leadership consistency and chain-of-command stability constitute central elements in the credibility of signals transmitted to the adversary. Therefore, the way institutional adjustments are interpreted directly influences the strategic reading of actors such as Iran, as well as allies who monitor the coherence of U.S. leadership.

Consequently, the analysis should not be limited to describing organizational changes, but rather understood as part of a broader process of strategic communication in wartime contexts, where institutional

structure and international perception operate simultaneously.

8. Moral, cohesion and leadership in war

8.1 Morale as a Strategic Element

In classical military theory, morale has been regarded as an intangible yet decisive factor in the conduct of war. From Carl von Clausewitz, who incorporated it within the “moral forces” of conflict, to contemporary approaches, there is consensus that combat effectiveness does not depend exclusively on material capabilities, but also on the psychological and ethical condition of those who execute war.

In operational terms, morale can be understood as the sustained willingness of members of an armed force to accomplish their mission, even under extreme conditions of risk. This willingness does not arise automatically; rather, it is built through a combination of factors, among which the clarity of purpose, trust in leadership, and perception of legitimacy of action are particularly important.

When these elements remain aligned, morale acts as a force multiplier. When they weaken, it can become a strategic vulnerability.

8.2 Military Vocation, Sacrifice, and Sense of Purpose

Modern armed forces, particularly in democracies such as the United States, do not operate solely on the basis of hierarchical obedience, but within a complex normative framework in which constitutional duty, international humanitarian law, and a professional military ethic converge. Military vocation is therefore not only technical, but also moral: it is sustained by the idea that the use of force responds to a legitimate, bounded, and legally justifiable purpose.

At this point, the relationship between political leadership and military morale is structural. As Peter D. Feaver has argued in his theory of civil-military bargaining, armed forces accept civilian control as long as there exists a “balance of trust” between political authority and professional interpretation of

the mission. When this balance erodes, obedience is not necessarily broken, but the normative cohesion sustaining military action is weakened.

Similarly, Thomas C. Schelling has noted that the effectiveness of strategic coercion depends not only on military capability, but also on the credibility of political messaging and its limits. When strategic language becomes excessively broad, ambiguous, or maximalist, the capacity to translate political objectives into bounded military action is weakened.

Within this framework, recent conflicts related to Iran reveal a particularly sensitive tension: the coexistence of political discourses that have incorporated absolute formulations—including implicit or explicit references to the total destruction of state capabilities or even of an entire political order—with a military structure trained under principles of proportionality, target discrimination, and compliance with international humanitarian law.

This divergence is not a minor aspect. Analytically, when political discourse approaches logics of total delegitimization of the adversary, a potential clash emerges with the professional military ethic, which is designed to limit violence rather than conceive it as the total elimination of a political or civilizational actor. This mismatch may generate internal tensions in mission interpretation, even if the formal chain of command remains intact.

In operational terms, this does not imply a breakdown of military discipline, but it may affect three critical levels: the clarity of mission purpose, the interpretation of limits on the use of force, and the moral perception of legitimacy among combatants. Over time, these factors directly influence internal cohesion and the psychological sustainability of the military effort.

As Mackubin Thomas Owens has noted, one of the less visible but most important pillars of military effectiveness is the existence of a

strategic narrative that allows soldiers to understand not only what they are doing, but why they are doing it within morally and legally defensible boundaries.

In the case of Iran, the coexistence of multiple justificatory frameworks for the conflict—from national security to broader geopolitical objectives—combined with variations in political language, introduces an additional layer of complexity: the difficulty of maintaining a clear line between strategic objective, ethical constraint, and military execution. This tension, rather than weakening obedience, erodes the moral clarity of purpose, which is a central component of cohesion in contemporary democracies.

8.3 Political Discourse, Legality, and Tensions in Military Cohesion

As noted in the previous section, coherence between political leadership, military execution, and the normative framework is a central element for morale stability and institutional cohesion in wartime contexts. Building on this, an additional layer of tension emerges when political discourse not only amplifies or reinterprets conflict objectives, but introduces statements that do not always fully correspond to verified operational reality.

Here, the issue is not merely rhetorical style or intensity of language, but the relationship between discourse and factual truth within the strategic chain of command. In high-intensity environments, public statements of strong impact—such as those referring to immediate military outcomes or the destruction of strategic targets—may coexist with internal intelligence assessments or operational reports that do not fully confirm such claims.

This type of dissonance does not necessarily break military discipline, but it introduces a particular tension within institutional cohesion: professional military personnel operate under the expectation that the strategic information guiding action maintains

a minimum level of consistency across political, technical, and operational layers.

As Thomas C. Schelling has noted, the effectiveness of strategic power depends heavily on credibility. When credibility is affected—not only vis-à-vis the adversary but also within the state structure itself—the system of conflict governance enters a zone of increased interpretative friction.

In the recent dynamics of the conflict with Iran, this phenomenon has been visible in high-level political statements presenting military outcomes in absolute terms. At different moments, official discourse has claimed the “total destruction” of Iranian capabilities, including the alleged elimination of its air force, navy, and command chain. These statements have been disseminated through public channels and official political accounts, and reported by international media such as Fox News and CNN (CNN, 2026; Fox News, 2026).

However, subsequent operational reports and conflict assessments show a more complex reality. Iran has maintained active response capabilities, including sustained drone and missile activity against regional targets, as well as the continued functioning of basic military command structures, according to intelligence reporting and international coverage (DW, 2026; CNN, 2026).

A similar pattern can be observed in announcements of immediate tactical results—such as the neutralization of specific military installations or the elimination of particular capabilities—which are later nuanced by technical assessments or by the evolution of the conflict on the ground.

Beyond specific cases, the pattern is consistent: political narrative tends to project absolute or definitive strategic outcomes, while operational evidence reflects partial, incomplete, or non-sustained effects over time. This gap between public discourse and military verification introduces a relevant tension within the conflict governance system, with direct impact on strategic

coherence and on how the scenario is interpreted by internal and external actors.

8.4 Cumulative Impact on Cohesion and War Governance

The elements analyzed—strategic ambiguity, institutional tensions, variability in political discourse, and questions regarding the legality of certain actions—do not operate in isolation. Their effect is cumulative and, in prolonged war contexts, tends to manifest as a problem of coherence in the conduct of the strategic process.

As these variables overlap, uncertainty increases not only about the purpose of the conflict, but also about the relationship between political objectives, public messaging, and operational outcomes. As Martin van Creveld has noted, contemporary military systems under high informational pressure do not fail solely due to lack of capability, but due to the progressive degradation of clarity within the decision-making chain.

In the recent case involving Iran, this phenomenon is expressed through the coexistence of multiple layers of information: high-impact political statements, technical intelligence assessments, evolving operational reports, and a fragmented media narrative. The result is not merely a difference in interpretation across institutional levels, but a superposition of signals that can hinder a coherent reading of the strategic environment.

The tension is not limited to the strictly military domain. When the relationship between political discourse, technical assessment, and operational outcomes is not fully consistent, a zone of ambiguity emerges that affects how conflict objectives, success criteria, and the stability of decisions over time are understood.

This process has a broader consequence. The difficulty in maintaining a clear line between what is communicated, what is ordered, and what actually occurs on the ground not only affects internal conflict governance, but also

influences how the conflict is interpreted by external actors. As discrepancies between strategic narrative and verifiable outcomes become more visible, war ceases to be only an operational phenomenon and becomes also a problem of interpretation and credibility of the decision-making system itself.

It is precisely at this point that war transcends its operational dimension and moves into another equally decisive terrain: that of perception.

9. Perception as a battlefield

9.1 Theoretical Foundations: Perception as a Strategic Dimension of War

Perception has become one of the central dimensions of contemporary warfare, insofar as it conditions both the legitimacy of the use of force and the political sustainability of conflicts. Unlike classical approaches focused exclusively on military capability, contemporary strategic literature has incorporated perception as an autonomous domain of competition.

Authors such as Joseph S. Nye Jr. have developed the concept of soft power, highlighting that the ability to shape the perceptions of other actors can be as decisive as military or economic power. In a similar vein, Lawrence Freedman argues that modern strategy is not only executed on the battlefield, but also in the narrative domain, where interpretations of war, its objectives, and its outcomes are constructed.

From a more classical perspective, Carl von Clausewitz already anticipated this dimension when he noted that war is deeply influenced by moral and psychological factors. Today, these factors have expanded into complex informational environments in which media, social networks, and political actors interact simultaneously.

Within this framework, perception is not a passive element of conflict, but a battlefield in its own right.

9.2 Information Warfare and Narrative Construction

Contemporary warfare structurally incorporates an informational dimension in which state actors actively seek to influence the interpretation of conflict. In this ecosystem, media outlets do not function solely as observers, but also as amplifiers, validators, or, in some cases, counterweights to official narratives.

In the recent conflict between the United States and Iran, informational dynamics are expressed through the coexistence of deeply divergent narratives disseminated through official channels, international media, and alternative platforms.

On the one hand, the U.S. political leadership—particularly President Donald Trump in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief—has advanced a narrative of rapid victory and neutralization of Iranian military capability. These statements, delivered in public addresses and through his Truth Social platform, have been reported by Reuters, Associated Press, BBC News, and Fox News, documenting claims that the Iranian Navy “no longer exists,” its Air Force has been “eliminated,” and that the conflict is “practically concluded.” In the same line, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth described the situation as a “decisive military victory,” reinforcing the perception of full operational control. Furthermore, on May 1, 2026, the President formally declared an end to hostilities, arguing the absence of active combat operations.

In contrast, Iranian state and semi-official media such as Press TV, the Islamic Republic News Agency, and Tasnim News Agency have sustained a radically different narrative, reporting the continuation of military operations, including missile and drone strikes against U.S. and allied targets in the region. These reports include alleged impacts on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, as well as the persistence of operational capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz, directly contradicting the U.S. version of events.

This contrast does not necessarily imply that one narrative is entirely true and the other

entirely false. Rather, it reveals a structural informational gap in which each actor constructs an interpretation aligned with its strategic objectives: consolidating domestic support, influencing allies, and shaping adversary perceptions.

A further element characterizing the contemporary environment is the transformation of the media ecosystem. Unlike earlier conflicts, where major media organizations concentrated narrative power, today digital platforms, social networks, and podcast formats have fragmented and expanded sources of information. In these spaces, former senior military officers, ex-intelligence officials—including former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel—as well as analysts and security experts regularly provide technical assessments of the real development of the conflict. Many of these interventions, widely disseminated across digital platforms, have contributed to qualifying, challenging, or contrasting official narratives regarding the course of the war.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Iran, where academics and analysts have used alternative channels to project their interpretations beyond state media, thereby broadening the global informational spectrum.

The result is a highly dynamic informational environment in which perception can no longer be centrally controlled. In this context, claims such as the termination of the conflict or the total neutralization of the adversary—when operational signals suggest otherwise—are rapidly contested by multiple sources, generating a permanent space of debate.

At the same time, analyses published in outlets such as the Financial Times and Bloomberg have suggested that certain high-impact political statements have coincided temporally with significant movements in energy and financial markets. These coincidences have drawn the attention of institutions such as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, as well as U.S.

Senate bodies, which have raised concerns about potential implications related to insider information affecting economic markets. Without drawing conclusions, this element introduces an additional dimension to informational warfare: its potential interaction with economic variables and perceptions of stability.

Overall, this environment demonstrates that informational warfare is not limited to classical propaganda, but constitutes a complex system in which political discourse, traditional media, digital platforms, independent experts, and economic variables interact simultaneously. In this sense, narrative does not merely describe conflict—it actively participates in its strategic development.

9.3 Vietnam as a Structural Case of Strategic Perception

The Vietnam War is one of the most frequently cited cases in strategic literature regarding the gap between military capability and political perception of conflict.

It was a conflict fought between 1955 and 1975, with direct U.S. involvement primarily between 1965 and 1973, supporting South Vietnam against North Vietnamese communist forces and the Viet Cong, backed by China and the Soviet Union. According to widely documented historical analyses by BBC News and the U.S. Department of Defense, the war developed under an asymmetric logic in which a conventionally superior military power confronted an adversary with lower technological capacity but strong irregular warfare capabilities, diffuse territorial control, and significant political and social support in rural areas.

Despite U.S. military superiority in terms of firepower and logistics, the war lasted nearly two decades and progressively eroded domestic consensus within the United States. Media coverage, combined with growing political and social opposition at home, transformed public perception of the conflict.

As extensively analyzed by historians such as George C. Herring in *America's Longest War* and reported by BBC News retrospectives on Vietnam, the decisive factor was not a conventional battlefield defeat, but the loss of political and social sustainability of the war effort within the United States.

From this perspective, U.S. withdrawal cannot be explained solely through military variables, but rather through the convergence of three factors: prolonged attrition, erosion of domestic support, and a structural transformation in public perception of the conflict.

Vietnam thus becomes a paradigmatic case, demonstrating that a war may remain militarily viable for a prolonged period while becoming strategically unsustainable once internal perception shifts irreversibly.

From this standpoint, the contemporary conflict with Iran does not appear as an anomaly, but rather as the current expression of a broader dynamic in which war is also contested in the realm of narrative, credibility, and interpretation of reality.

9.4 Transformation of the Enemy Image

One of the central elements of informational warfare is the construction of the adversary. From the perspective of perception theory in international relations, Robert Jervis has argued that states do not respond solely to the objective reality of another actor, but to the image they construct of it—an image that may be incomplete, distorted, or selective, and that tends to evolve when new evidence contradicts prior expectations.

This phenomenon is not merely theoretical. Historical precedents exist in which initial strategic perceptions of an adversary were later revised due to the evolution of the conflict. A widely cited case is the Vietnam War, where, as military historian Andrew J. Bacevich has noted, segments of U.S. political and strategic leadership initially operated under assumptions that underestimated the political and military resilience of the adversary. The evolution of the conflict later

forced a reassessment of those perceptions, driven both by adversary adaptation and by the accumulation of information contradicting initial interpretive frameworks.

From a sociological perspective, Erving Goffman complements this analysis by explaining how actors in conflict are often “framed” within simplified categories that facilitate comprehension under conditions of uncertainty but may constrain accurate interpretation of their behavior.

In the case of the conflict with Iran, various Western narratives have tended to represent the adversary through simplified categories emphasizing hostility or presumed irrationality. These representations serve a strategic function in legitimizing the use of force and reinforcing political cohesion.

However, the evolution of the conflict and Iran’s diplomatic and strategic responses have introduced elements of complexity that have partially modified these perceptions in certain analytical and media circles. In particular, Iran’s capacity to adapt under military, economic, and informational pressure has led to reassessments in academic, media, and digital environments.

From this perspective, a process of adversary reconstruction can be observed: when a previously simplified actor demonstrates consistent strategic resilience, the informational ecosystem tends to reconfigure its initial image, incorporating nuances previously ignored or minimized.

Thus, perception not only constructs the adversary; in contemporary warfare, it also determines when that construction ceases to be functional.

9.5 Media, Social Networks, and Technology as Perception Accelerators

The digitalization of the informational environment has structurally transformed the way perceptions are constructed and contested in contemporary conflicts.

As previously noted, the official U.S. government narrative regarding the war

currently coexists with multiple alternative sources of information, including digital media, social networks, and specialized podcasts. This phenomenon has intensified the simultaneous circulation of contradictory accounts, reducing verification timeframes and expanding the reach of divergent interpretations.

In communication theory, Marshall McLuhan famously argued that “the medium is the message,” meaning that the mode of transmission directly shapes interpretation. Similarly, Manuel Castells has described the emergence of a network society in which meaning production is no longer monopolized by traditional institutions but distributed across interconnected actors.

In the case of the conflict with Iran, this dynamic is reflected in the coexistence of official U.S. government statements, Iranian responses, and international media coverage (Reuters, BBC News, Associated Press), alongside a growing ecosystem of analysis on digital platforms featuring former military and intelligence officials as well as independent analysts.

This latter element is particularly significant, as it introduces a new layer of strategic interpretation: actors with prior institutional experience actively participate in shaping the public narrative of the conflict, reinforcing, challenging, or qualifying official accounts.

From the perspective of decision-making psychology, Daniel Kahneman has shown that in conditions of information overload, individuals rely on cognitive shortcuts, increasing the influence of simple, repeated, or emotionally charged messages over more complex analytical assessments.

The result is an environment in which perception of conflict is continuously constructed in real time as a contested space between official narratives, media interpretations, and independent analysis.

9.6 Internal vs International Perception

Contemporary warfare operates simultaneously on two levels of perception: internal and international. Internal perception targets domestic public opinion and armed forces, while international perception addresses allies, adversaries, and multilateral institutions.

When these two levels are not aligned, tensions emerge that affect the coherence of the strategic message and the global interpretation of the conflict.

A particularly relevant element of this dynamic is its impact within the armed forces themselves. In highly institutionalized military systems such as that of the United States, perceived coherence between political leadership and operational reality is a central factor in discipline and morale. Statements by the Commander-in-Chief may function as instruments of strategic deterrence, thereby reinforcing internal cohesion. However, when such statements are perceived as excessively optimistic or disconnected from operational assessments, they may generate uncertainty regarding the actual state and direction of the conflict.

Informational dissonance is therefore not confined to the external domain of war but is also projected inward into the military structure responsible for implementing political decisions. This introduces a particularly sensitive condition in contemporary warfare: a single strategic message may simultaneously function as an instrument of deterrence toward the adversary and as a source of internal ambiguity within the system that generates it.

From the perspective of institutional cohesion, this duality reflects what strategic literature describes as a problem of “dual audience” political-military communication. The message is not only directed outward but is also assessed internally by actors with more precise operational information, generating divergent interpretations regarding the gap between political narrative and tactical reality.

When this gap widens, tensions may emerge in the vertical trust of the civil-military chain of command, one of the structural pillars of democratic systems. In prolonged or highly complex scenarios, this dynamic does not necessarily affect immediate operational capability, but it does introduce cumulative friction in institutional cohesion.

Perception thus becomes an autonomous battlefield within contemporary warfare. It does not merely reflect the reality of conflict but actively participates in its construction, interpretation, and legitimization.

The analysis of the Iran case, together with the historical precedent of Vietnam, reveals a recurrent structural pattern: the gap between narrative and reality can produce strategic effects as significant as military operations themselves.

Contemporary war is defined not only by what occurs on the battlefield, but also by how those events are perceived, narrated, and accepted by different actors within the international system. Perception, therefore, is not a secondary element of conflict, but a central component of its strategic dynamics.

10. Legitimacy, discourse, and political leadership

10.1 Construction of legitimacy in contexts of war

In contemporary warfare, legitimacy is not solely a legal or institutional concept, but a central element of social cohesion. In practical terms, legitimacy allows a society to perceive that the conflict in which it is engaged—directly or indirectly—is “its war,” meaning a war whose costs, sacrifices, and risks are considered justified by a comprehensible strategic objective.

From Max Weber’s classical perspective, legitimacy rests on the belief that the exercise of power is valid. In wartime contexts, this belief translates into a collective willingness to accept the costs of war under the premise that it serves a necessary purpose.

In the case of the conflict between the United States and Iran, this legitimacy is primarily constructed through political leadership discourse and its capacity to sustain a coherent narrative regarding the reasons for the conflict. However, the evidence from the recent communication cycle shows that this justification has undergone significant variations over time.

As previously noted, according to public statements reported by outlets such as Reuters, Associated Press, and BBC News, among others, the official discourse has shifted from containing nuclear capabilities to broader objectives related to military neutralization and, at times, to more expansive formulations concerning the elimination of the Iranian strategic threat. At certain moments, these narratives have been accompanied by high-impact statements that significantly expand the scope of the original objective.

This shift has direct implications: when objectives are broadened or repeatedly redefined, it becomes more difficult for public opinion to clearly identify what constitutes a successful outcome or a definitive endpoint of the conflict.

However, legitimacy does not depend solely on discourse but also on its social reception. At this point, empirical data introduces a critical element. According to a Washington Post / ABC News / Ipsos survey (May 1, 2026), 61% of Americans considered the use of force against Iran a “mistake,” compared to 36% who considered it justified.

This type of result can be interpreted through David Easton’s theory, which distinguishes between specific support and diffuse support. In this case, the decline in support for the decision to go to war indicates an erosion of specific support that directly affects the operational legitimacy of the conflict.

When a majority of society interprets the war as a mistake, the perception of it as a collective cause weakens. Rather than

consolidating cohesion, the conflict becomes perceived as a politically contested decision.

This phenomenon does not merely reflect declining support but signals a progressive erosion of the consensus that sustains legitimacy. In democratic systems, this dynamic has cumulative effects: it increases the political costs of war, reduces leadership maneuverability, and conditions the continuity of strategy.

In this context, one can speak of a social tolerance threshold, beyond which legitimacy ceases to function as an enabling factor and instead becomes a constraint on state action.

From a strategic perspective, this implies that the conduct of war depends not only on military variables but also on maintaining a minimum level of domestic consensus that allows it to be sustained politically over time. When that consensus weakens, even tactical successes lose their capacity to translate into political success.

More broadly, the conflict with Iran illustrates a structural tension in contemporary democracies: the divergence between the strategic rationality of the state and the social perception of the conflict. When this gap widens, war ceases to be merely an instrument of foreign policy and becomes an internal pressure factor with direct implications for governance.

10.2 Political language and strategic narrative

Political language in wartime does not merely define objectives or justify decisions; it actively shapes how the conflict is perceived both domestically and internationally. What matters is not only what is said, but how it is said.

As discussed in previous chapters, strategic narrative is a central component in the construction of legitimacy. However, in contemporary practice, political language does not operate solely as a mechanism of coherence, but also as a tool of simplification,

emotionalization, and in some cases, dehumanization of the adversary.

From the perspective of political communication theory, scholars such as George Lakoff have explained how language constructs interpretative frames that shape how audiences understand reality. In wartime contexts, these frames may reinforce perceptions of threat, urgency, and the necessity of force.

In the case of the United States–Iran conflict, particularly aggressive expressions have been documented from both political and military leadership, widely reported by Reuters, CNN, Fox News, and Newsweek.

This type of rhetoric serves a function of emotional mobilization by reinforcing a distinction between “us” and “them.” However, its effects are not unidimensional.

Domestically, excessively aggressive language may generate tensions within segments of public opinion and within institutional spheres where the conflict is analyzed under technical parameters.

Internationally, it may erode perceptions of state rationality and complicate the sustainability of diplomatic support.

Finally, in relation to the adversary, discursive dehumanization tends to reduce the space for negotiation by increasing the political cost of dialogue. As Herbert C. Kelman has argued, constructing the adversary as an irrational actor limits its recognition as a legitimate interlocutor, thereby hindering de-escalation processes.

Political language is therefore not an accessory element of war but a strategic variable with operational effects.

10.3 Relationship between discourse, power, and social acceptance

If the previous sections examined how political discourse constructs legitimacy, the issue now is its translation into social acceptance.

Discourse does not operate in a vacuum. Its effectiveness depends on reception. In line with Jürgen Habermas, the legitimacy of power depends on its recognition as valid by its audience.

As David Easton has noted, system stability depends on political support, distinguishing between specific support and diffuse support. In wartime contexts, this distinction is critical: confidence in the system may persist while a specific decision is rejected.

In the United States–Iran conflict, public opinion data reflects precisely this tension: a significant proportion of the population considers the intervention a mistake, without necessarily rejecting the political system as a whole.

This gap introduces a disjunction between discursive production and social reception. When discourse is not perceived as credible or necessary, its capacity to sustain strategic decisions weakens.

In democratic systems, the sustainability of war depends on maintaining a sufficient level of public support. When this support erodes, discourse ceases to function as a mechanism of power consolidation and becomes a space of contestation.

10.4 Impact of leadership on global perception of the conflict

The impact of leadership acquires an additional dimension when projected onto the international system. At this level, leadership does not only communicate a narrative of the conflict but also influences alliance cohesion.

From Joseph S. Nye’s perspective, state power also depends on its credibility and perceived coherence.

In the case of the United States–Iran conflict, various statements and decisions have been interpreted by allies as signals of tension in strategic coordination.

In Europe, several leaders have expressed concern about the impact of the conflict on regional and energy security. In parallel,

warnings have emerged regarding the need for greater coordination within NATO.

These positions reflect nuances within the allied bloc in a context of high strategic sensitivity.

From an analytical perspective, these exchanges should not be interpreted as isolated episodes but as part of a broader process of reconfiguration in leadership perception. The way leadership communicates and manages tensions directly affects alliance stability.

Consequently, the impact of leadership on global perception is not merely symbolic. It has cumulative effects on strategic trust and on the credibility of the alliance system in wartime scenarios.

11. Global implications of the conflict

11.1 The cost of war: political economy of power, strategic logistics, and legitimacy

One of the least discussed elements in the analysis of contemporary warfare is its real cost. Decisions to go to war involve not only political or security considerations, but also a complex economic architecture that encompasses military preparation, operational deployment, logistical sustainability, and the replenishment of deployed military capabilities.

In the case of the United States, the costs of war have reached unprecedented levels. According to the Costs of War Project at Brown University, federal spending on post-9/11 wars has exceeded 8 trillion dollars. This figure, which includes military operations, veteran care, and debt interest, demonstrates that the cost of war does not end on the battlefield but extends for decades, affecting the fiscal structure of the state.

Military expenditure cannot be understood as a set of isolated decisions, but rather as a continuous system of resource allocation. This system includes intelligence, cyber defense, overseas base maintenance, and the immediate replacement of strategic equipment. According to the Congressional

Budget Office (CBO), a significant portion of these resources is channeled through “emergency supplemental spending,” allowing operations to be financed without formally altering the Pentagon’s base budget.

To this structural dimension, an equally decisive but less visible element must be added: the construction of political legitimacy. Sustaining a war requires continuous investment in political capital, strategic communication, and public diplomacy. This dimension can be understood as a “legitimacy economy,” in which the state seeks to maintain the social support necessary for the continuity of the war effort.

Various media outlets, including the Washington Post, have documented how communication strategies form an integral part of contemporary warfare. Without this component, congressional approval of multibillion-dollar budgets would be significantly constrained, directly affecting the sustainability of the conflict.

The human cost constitutes another fundamental dimension. Although often expressed in quantitative terms through the concept of the “statistical value of life,” war in practice produces effects that go far beyond any economic metric. The Costs of War Project has highlighted that, in addition to direct casualties, there are indirect costs associated with the collapse of health systems, mass displacement, and the loss of human capital. Each casualty represents not only an individual loss but also the impact on technological and organizational systems whose development has required billions of dollars in investment.

11.2 The cost of war applied to the Iran case: escalation and sustainability

When analyzing the confrontation with Iran in May 2026, the theoretical dimension of the cost of war translates into an immediate operational problem of high strategic intensity.

According to testimony presented to Congress in April 2026 by the Comptroller of the

Department of Defense, the conflict—operationally referred to as Epic Fury—has so far generated an estimated expenditure of approximately 25 billion dollars, mainly in precision munitions, missile defense, and operational maintenance. In addition, a formal supplemental budget request of 200 billion dollars has been submitted to sustain escalation and replenish arsenals, which would be incorporated into a projected defense budget of 1.5 trillion dollars for fiscal year 2027.

This level of spending reflects not only the intensity of the conflict but also the rate of consumption of military capabilities in technologically intensive warfare. The deployment of a carrier strike group in the region, for example, implies daily costs estimated between 11 and 15 million dollars, according to analyses by CSIS and the CBO.

To this operational component, the cost of rebuilding damaged military infrastructure must be added. Satellite analysis and multiple reports have identified damage to at least 15 U.S. military installations across seven Gulf countries, including logistical centers in Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait. The replacement of fixed infrastructure, radar systems, specialized aircraft, and command-and-control capabilities is estimated at 40 to 50 billion dollars.

Although this is primarily a technologically driven war, the conflict has also generated human losses. As of May 2026, at least 13 U.S. military personnel have been killed and hundreds injured, introducing an additional political dimension in terms of domestic sustainability of the war effort.

At the same time, the war has accelerated a structural transformation in U.S. defense policy. The increased use of unmanned systems has led to a major expansion in drone-related spending, exceeding 74 billion dollars. Meanwhile, the replenishment of missile defense systems such as Patriot and THAAD has required approximately 30 billion dollars, reflecting a reconfiguration of the cost-effectiveness balance in air defense.

11.3 The fiscal trilemma: debt, hegemony, and domestic welfare

From a political economy perspective, the conflict reveals a structural trilemma between international hegemony, fiscal sustainability, and domestic welfare. The expansion of defense spending directly tensions the state's ability to maintain its internal social contract.

The phenomenon known as the “crowding-out effect” is reflected in the reallocation of resources from civilian sectors toward defense. Various analyses by the Costs of War Project and the Christian Science Monitor indicate that increases in military spending have coincided with pressure to reduce investment in areas such as education, housing, medical research, and social infrastructure.

This displacement is not only budgetary but also political. Recent 2026 polling indicates that a significant portion of the population considers military spending excessive compared to other national priorities, particularly healthcare and education.

In addition, the public debt dimension—exceeding 39 trillion dollars in 2026—introduces a structural vulnerability, limiting the state's ability to simultaneously respond to internal and external crises.

In the case of U.S. relations with Israel, sustained financial support has also become subject to increasing scrutiny. According to the Costs of War Project and the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, cumulative military assistance exceeds 21.7 billion dollars since October 2023. While this relationship is framed within the logic of “Qualitative Military Edge,” it also raises questions about its sustainability under conditions of fiscal pressure.

11.4 Ideological dimensions: risk interpretation and perception of war

Foreign policy decisions are not driven exclusively by material factors but also by ideological and cognitive frameworks that shape how states interpret risk. In this sense,

perceptions of vulnerability are not objective data but politically constructed interpretations that directly influence willingness to engage in prolonged conflicts.

In this regard, Robert Jervis has shown that states do not respond to international reality as it is, but rather to their perception of it through strategic beliefs and cognitive frameworks. Practically, this means that threat assessment is not limited to the military adversary but also includes economic, energy, political, and social risks associated with war.

In the U.S. case, these risks manifest simultaneously at multiple levels: potential regional escalation, disruption of global energy markets, domestic inflationary pressures, impacts on international alliances, and erosion of domestic political support for prolonged military engagements.

Applied to energy and international security, this tension appears in the contradiction between narratives of energy self-sufficiency and the structural reality of global interdependence. While some political narratives argue that domestic production reduces exposure to external crises, institutions such as the Energy Information Administration (EIA) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have emphasized that global energy markets continue to transmit external shocks through prices, supply chains, and financial systems.

This divergence between political narrative and structural dynamics has direct implications for war policy. As economic costs increase—particularly through energy inflation and market volatility—social support tends to erode, introducing internal constraints on military operations.

The Vietnam War provides an illustrative precedent, as rising human and economic costs progressively undermined domestic consensus in the United States, ultimately affecting the political viability of the war.

Within the U.S. decision-making system, risk interpretation is not abstract but institutionally processed through mechanisms

such as the National Security Council and the intelligence community, which translate these perceptions into policy options before reaching presidential decision-making levels.

11.5 Medium- and long-term effects on the international system

Beyond their immediate impact, contemporary conflicts produce structural transformations in the international system. Modern wars not only alter military balances or diplomatic relations but also affect norms, collective security mechanisms, and long-term strategic perceptions. As Joseph S. Nye Jr. has noted, international crises accelerate power redistribution processes and gradually erode the control capacity of traditional international systems. Similarly, John J. Mearsheimer argues that in contexts of increasing strategic competition, states prioritize survival and deterrence over multilateral regulatory frameworks.

One of the areas where these tensions are most evident is the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, structured around the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and supervised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Various reports by the IAEA and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) have warned about growing tensions in its implementation, linked to perceptions of inequality and contradictory strategic incentives within the system.

The case of North Korea is one of the most relevant precedents. Its withdrawal from the NPT in 2003 and subsequent development of nuclear capabilities reinforced, in certain strategic circles, the perception that nuclear deterrence can function as a regime survival mechanism even under sustained political isolation and economic pressure.

In the Middle East, these tensions are even more complex due to regional rivalries, threat perceptions, and strategic asymmetries. In this context, Israel's non-accession to the NPT and its long-standing policy of nuclear ambiguity have generated recurring debates

regarding the consistency and universality of the non-proliferation regime.

The coexistence of a formal non-proliferation regime with widely recognized de facto exceptions, such as Israel, has challenged perceptions of universality within the system. SIPRI and IAEA reports have noted that such perceived asymmetries may influence strategic incentives of other regional actors, particularly in highly volatile geopolitical environments.

This situation has fueled a broader debate about perceived strategic imbalance in the Middle East. From various academic and political perspectives, a contradiction has been highlighted between international tolerance of Israel's nuclear ambiguity policy and the pressure directed at Iran regarding uranium enrichment under international supervision, which, under certain conditions, is permitted for civilian purposes under the NPT framework. From a regional security perspective, this differential treatment has been interpreted by various actors as undermining the perceived universality and coherence of the non-proliferation regime.

It is within this broader framework that a recent communication by a group of U.S. legislators to Secretary of State Marco Rubio requesting clarification on Israel's nuclear status should be understood. While framed in institutional and legal terms, its emergence reflects how these asymmetries have increasingly entered domestic U.S. political debate.

Within this broader context, the dynamics surrounding Iran should be understood not as an isolated event, but as part of deeper structural transformations of the contemporary international system. The combination of strategic competition, perceived asymmetrical application of international norms, and weakening multilateral regulatory mechanisms contributes to an environment characterized by greater uncertainty, reduced predictability, and increasing fragmentation of the global order.

12. GEOPOLITICS OF CONFLICT: ALLIANCES, INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM, AND POWER RECONFIGURATION

12.1 War as a systemic reordering phenomenon

Contemporary conflicts cannot be understood merely as bilateral confrontations between states, but rather as processes that directly affect the structure of the international system. War does not only redistribute power on the battlefield; it also reshapes threat perceptions, alignment patterns, and levels of cohesion within existing alliances.

The conflict between the United States and Iran is an illustrative case of this dynamic, insofar as its effects extend beyond the regional scope of the Middle East and project onto the global security architecture. In particular, the conflict activates latent tensions within the Western bloc and exposes the operational limitations of traditional mechanisms of strategic coordination.

12.2 Alliances as structures of conditioned decision-making

International alliances constitute one of the main mechanisms of strategic articulation in the contemporary international system. Their function is not limited to military cooperation but also includes political coordination, intelligence sharing, strategic deterrence, and regional stability-building. However, alliances do not operate as homogeneous or automatic structures. There are bilateral alliances, ad hoc coalitions, and collective defense systems, each with different levels of institutionalization, political commitment, and operational capacity.

In the case of the United States, the main strategic alliance structure is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), created in 1949 in the context of the Cold War as a collective defense system against Soviet expansion in Europe. NATO currently brings together states from North America and Europe under a shared politico-military framework based on permanent consultation,

military interoperability, and joint planning and defense mechanisms.

Within this structure, the United States occupies a central position both due to its military capabilities and its political and strategic role. In addition to being the alliance's principal military power, Washington exerts decisive influence in areas such as intelligence, logistics, global projection, and nuclear deterrence. Operationally, much of NATO's strategic architecture depends on U.S. military resources, leading many analysts to describe the alliance as a collective security system heavily conditioned by American leadership.

However, even within highly institutionalized structures such as NATO, collective action continues to depend on the sovereign decisions of each member state. Although Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty establishes the principle of collective defense, its activation does not imply an automatic obligation of direct military participation. Each state retains the authority to determine, according to its constitutional procedures and domestic political considerations, the nature and scope of its response to a given crisis or conflict.

This feature introduces a structural element of flexibility which simultaneously becomes a permanent source of strategic uncertainty. In the case of the United States–Iran conflict, this uncertainty translates into constant variability in levels of commitment, coordination, and response within Western alliances. The existence of an alliance does not eliminate national differences regarding threat perception, political costs, economic interests, or escalation risks.

In the context of the conflict with Iran, this logic became particularly visible. Although the United States maintains strong military alliances with various European countries, NATO as an organization did not directly intervene in the conflict. Several European governments adopted differentiated positions regarding the level of involvement, reflecting not only strategic divergences but

also internal constraints related to political stability, energy dependency, public opinion, and fear of regional escalation.

This situation raised questions in segments of international public opinion about the actual functioning of Western military alliances and about why NATO did not act as a unified bloc in response to a confrontation led by the United States. However, from the institutional perspective of the alliance itself, the case did not automatically trigger collective defense mechanisms designed for scenarios involving a direct attack on allied territory in the North Atlantic area.

From the theoretical perspective of international relations, authors such as Stephen Walt have argued that alliance cohesion depends both on the distribution of capabilities and on the convergence of threat perceptions. When this convergence weakens, alliances do not disappear, but tend to operate with reduced levels of effective coordination and increasing margins of national autonomy.

Consequently, contemporary alliances should be understood not as automatic mechanisms of collective warfare, but as structures of conditioned decision-making, where cooperation, strategic calculation, and domestic politics continuously interact in defining the real level of commitment to a conflict.

12.3 Strategic fragmentation of the Western bloc

The dynamics of the United States–Iran conflict revealed significant differences within the Western bloc regarding threat interpretation, strategic priorities, and willingness to bear the costs of a potential regional escalation. While Washington tended to frame the Iranian crisis primarily through a logic of deterrence, strategic containment, and regional security, several European governments adopted more cautious approaches, prioritizing economic stability, energy security, and the risk of conflict spillover into other parts of the Middle East.

These differences are not entirely new. Since the end of the Cold War, various analysts have pointed to partially divergent strategic perceptions between the United States and some of its European allies regarding the use of force, the management of international crises, and the balance between military power and economic stability. Political scientist Robert Kagan summarized part of this debate by arguing that the United States and Europe tend, in certain circumstances, to approach international security differently: while Washington generally prioritizes coercive capability and strategic deterrence, several European actors tend to emphasize diplomatic mechanisms, regional stability, and escalation control.

In the specific case of the conflict with Iran, this divergence manifested at multiple levels. While the United States increased military pressure and hardened its strategic discourse, several European governments expressed reservations about escalation and voiced concern over potential impacts on energy markets, trade routes, and regional political stability. These positions reflected not only strategic differences but also varying levels of economic exposure and vulnerability to prolonged crisis scenarios.

From an analytical perspective, this situation should not necessarily be interpreted as a rupture within the Western bloc, but rather as a process of internal differentiation within a formally cohesive alliance system. Political and military convergence among allies does not eliminate the existence of differentiated national interests nor guarantee uniformity in threat perception or willingness to assume long-term strategic costs.

An additional factor reinforces this dynamic: the increasing public visibility of these differences. Contemporary diplomacy and strategic decision-making operate in an environment of high media exposure and instantaneous communication, where divergences that previously remained within confidential diplomatic channels are now immediately projected into the international

public sphere. This amplifies perceptions of fragmentation and can generate the impression of reduced strategic cohesion, even when institutional frameworks and formal alliance mechanisms remain intact.

In consequence, the Iran case demonstrated that contemporary Western alliances remain functional structures of strategic cooperation, but also spaces where differing national priorities, non-convergent threat perceptions, and varying levels of political willingness to engage in escalation coexist.

12.4 Regional alliances, energy security, and strategic pressure in the Middle East

The architecture of United States alliances in the Middle East constitutes one of the key pillars of its military projection and strategic influence in the region. Unlike NATO—a formal collective defense structure—in the Middle East Washington operates through a combination of bilateral security agreements, military cooperation frameworks, permanent base deployments, and strategic partnerships with key regional actors, particularly Israel and several Gulf states.

In the case of Israel, the relationship with the United States extends beyond the strictly military domain and encompasses political, technological, strategic, and even domestic dimensions within U.S. politics. Several authors and international security analysts, including John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, have argued that the alliance with Israel is one of the most influential components of U.S. Middle East policy. This relationship is expressed through advanced military cooperation, financial assistance, intelligence sharing, and continuous strategic coordination in response to shared regional threats, particularly Iran and Iran-aligned armed groups.

In parallel, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait have played a central role as platforms for military cooperation, intelligence sharing, logistics, and U.S. strategic deployment. The presence of military bases, missile defense

systems, and air and naval facilities has enabled the United States to maintain rapid response capabilities in regional crises and reinforce its deterrence posture in the Gulf.

This regional structure is also linked to the so-called “petrodollar system,” consolidated through political and energy agreements established between Washington and Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. Under this arrangement, the United States provided security guarantees and regional stability, while major Gulf oil producers priced their exports in U.S. dollars. Energy geopolitics specialists such as Daniel Yergin have noted that this model simultaneously strengthened the global position of the dollar and consolidated U.S. strategic presence in the Middle East.

This framework is also part of the broader economic-strategic order that Iran indirectly challenges through its confrontation with the United States and its pursuit of greater regional autonomy.

In the context of the war between the United States and Iran, this alliance network acquired even greater importance. For Tehran, the confrontation is not limited to a bilateral dispute with Washington but extends to the regional power system underpinning U.S. influence in the Middle East. From this perspective, Israel represents not only a strategic U.S. ally but also one of the main centers of military and political pressure against Iran in the region.

At the same time, Iranian actions and threats directed at Gulf-linked targets should be understood as part of a strategy aimed at weakening the security perception that sustains U.S.–Gulf partnerships. This dimension became particularly visible around the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime corridor through which a significant share of global oil and gas trade flows. For Gulf economies, the stability of this route is essential both for energy revenues and domestic economic stability.

From a strategic perspective, Iran’s capacity to disrupt maritime traffic, strike energy

infrastructure, or maintain offensive capability despite U.S. pressure sends a regional political message: prolonged confrontation may generate increasing costs for states that host U.S. military presence or maintain close alignment with Washington.

Various international analyses published by Reuters, the Financial Times, and The Wall Street Journal have highlighted that attacks on energy infrastructure and threats to maritime routes have increased Gulf states’ concerns about vulnerability to prolonged escalation. At the same time, some regional security experts have warned that the perception that the United States cannot fully prevent attacks on allies or strategic facilities could gradually reshape security calculations in parts of the region.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the main risk for Washington is not limited to military capability erosion in the region, but extends to a gradual weakening of strategic trust among its allies. If Gulf states begin to perceive that the costs of alignment with the United States exceed the actual guarantees of protection, they may increasingly pursue more autonomous foreign policies, diversify partnerships, or develop pragmatic rapprochements with other powers such as China and Russia.

Consequently, the war between the United States and Iran must be understood not only as a direct military confrontation, but also as a struggle over the future sustainability of the regional alliance system upon which U.S. strategic influence in the Middle East has been built for decades.

13. Conclusions

13.1 General synthesis: war in contemporary democracies

War in contemporary democracies, particularly in the case of the United States, is not a linear or exclusively military decision, but a complex political process in which executive institutions, the legislature, security agencies, international alliances, and public opinion interact continuously.

In this context, the decision to initiate or sustain a conflict depends both on strategic considerations and on the system's ability to generate legitimacy, maintain it over time, and absorb its internal costs. War, therefore, must be understood as a simultaneous test of institutional coherence and political and social resilience.

The case of the conflict with Iran illustrates this logic by showing how military escalation cannot be separated from the internal architecture of decision-making in the United States, nor from the constraints imposed by the political, economic, and alliance environment.

13.2 Fragmentation of power and limits of strategic coherence

The U.S. decision-making model on war reveals a structural tension between institutional design and political practice. Although the constitutional framework distributes war powers between Congress and the Executive, in practice the conduct of war is concentrated in the executive branch, while its sustainability depends on multiple simultaneous sources of political validation.

This fragmentation generates a recurring effect: the progressive expansion of strategic objectives without a clear delimitation of their limits. In the case of Iran, this dynamic is reflected in the coexistence of partially divergent logics of containment, deterrence, and escalation management.

13.3 Political legitimacy and the sustainability threshold of conflict

The legitimacy of war in democratic contexts is not a stable resource, but a dynamic process subject to continuous social and political evaluation.

Its sustainability depends on the ability of political leadership to maintain a coherent narrative before a society that assesses conflict in terms of outcomes, duration, and costs.

When this perception erodes, it does not necessarily produce an immediate

institutional crisis, but it does generate a gradual weakening of the political support required to sustain prolonged military operations. This introduces a social tolerance threshold for conflict, beyond which the continuation of war becomes politically unsustainable.

13.4 Human cost and the moral asymmetry of war decisions

One of the least visible elements in contemporary war analysis is the asymmetry between the costs incorporated into decision-making processes and the real human costs of conflict.

While financial, logistical, and strategic costs are integrated into public policy calculations, the direct human impact of war remains largely outside the core of strategic decision-making.

This asymmetry introduces a structural tension between state rationality and irreversible human consequences, which cannot be fully absorbed or compensated within the political system.

13.5 Weakening of international law and normative erosion

The contemporary international system is experiencing a growing gap between the formal existence of norms regulating the use of force and their effective enforcement in high-intensity security environments.

Although instruments such as the United Nations Charter and international humanitarian law remain formally valid, their capacity to constrain state behavior has weakened in practice in contexts of intensified national security concerns.

The structural consequence of this trend is the gradual displacement of norms by capabilities: in the absence of consistent enforcement mechanisms, the logic of power tends to prevail over the logic of law.

13.6 Alliances, strategic fragmentation, and coherence of the Western system

The conduct of contemporary warfare depends not only on military capabilities but also on the stability of international coalitions.

The analysis of the Iranian case shows that these alliances do not operate as homogeneous blocs, but as systems of differentiated cooperation, where each actor independently evaluates its costs, risks, and strategic priorities.

Divergences between the United States and some of its allies reflect differences in threat perception and in willingness to assume prolonged costs, introducing functional fragmentation within formally cohesive systems.

13.7 Implications for the regional strategic balance and the nuclear security regime

The conflict with Iran has reopened the debate on the security balance in the Middle East, particularly regarding the nuclear non-proliferation regime and its application in an environment characterized by perceived strategic asymmetries.

Beyond its technical dimensions, the central issue concerns the coherence of the normative framework governing nuclear capabilities in the region. The existence of differentiated standards, both in perception and in practice, introduces structural tensions into the legitimacy of the non-proliferation regime and into the stability of deterrence mechanisms.

In this context, the conflict is embedded in a broader dynamic of fragmentation of the international order, where the effectiveness of norms increasingly depends on their consistent application and on the perception of balance among relevant actors. Strategic stability is no longer based solely on the limitation of capabilities, but on the system's ability to preserve normative coherence in an environment shaped by power competition, differentiated alliances, and structural asymmetries.

The conflict has made clear that such coherence is today a critical—and increasingly

fragile—element of the international security architecture.

13.8 Final conclusion: war as a political system under increasing constraints

Contemporary war, particularly in the case of the United States, must be understood as a complex political system subject to multiple constraints: institutional, social, international, economic, and moral.

The Iranian case is not an exception but an expression of a broader structural trend: the growing difficulty of sustaining prolonged conflicts in democratic contexts where costs become visible, cumulative, and politically sensitive.

This process should also be understood as part of a broader systemic transition in the international order, in which war is not an isolated event but a mechanism that accelerates structural trends. The increasing fragmentation of alliances, the diversification of actors with strategic influence—including global powers, intermediate regional actors, and diplomatic mediation networks—as well as the reconfiguration of critical spaces such as the Persian Gulf, all reflect an international environment in transformation. Within this context, traditional and non-traditional forms of power coexist alongside increasingly complex mechanisms of cooperation, competition, and intermediation.

14. Reflection

The article concludes that contemporary war must be understood as a decision-making system subject to permanent structural tensions, conditioned by institutional limits, irreducible human costs, social pressure, economic sustainability, and international strategic fragmentation. From this perspective, the case of Iran does not merely represent a specific episode in U.S. foreign policy, but rather an expression of the growing difficulties modern democracies faces in sustaining prolonged conflicts in contexts of eroding legitimacy, global interdependence, and cumulative human and economic costs.

In contemporary democracies, war is not decided solely by military capability or strategic calculation, but by the political capacity to sustain its costs over time. When that capacity is exhausted, the outcome of conflict does not depend exclusively on military defeat, but on the gradual loss of internal legitimacy to continue the war.

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