



Iran: Coercive Negotiation to Win the Peace or Selective Battle to Win the War

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The war between the United States, Israel, and Iran has entered a phase typical of modern conflicts: **weapons are not lacking, but decisive options are.**

After weeks of attacks, the number of lucrative targets on Iranian territory is dwindling. At the same time, **Tehran continues to demonstrate greater resilience than expected**, keeping its missile, drone, and, above all, interdiction capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz operational, albeit in a degraded form.

According to Reuters, Iran has set very tough conditions for launching negotiations: an immediate halt to attacks, guarantees against further offensives, and compensation. A mediated ceasefire proposal has already been presented to both sides, but it was rejected because it was seen as a disguised surrender.

That is precisely the problem: no one can afford to lose, not even in the narrative (

A War That Cannot Be Won

The United States faces a strategic dilemma.

A ground invasion is ruled out: the necessary forces are not in the region, and the costs would be enormous.

A full-scale air campaign against Iranian civilian and oil infrastructure is technically possible, but it would risk triggering a global shock in energy prices.

According to analyses reported by The New York Times and The Washington Post, both sides initially **underestimated each other**. Washington believed the Iranian regime was more fragile,

while Tehran underestimated Israeli-American willingness to use force on a large scale.

The result is a stalemate.

The Real Battlefield: Hormuz

Today, the decisive factor is no longer purely military, but economic.

The Strait of Hormuz, through which a critical share of the world's oil passes, has become the center of gravity of the crisis. According to Reuters and data cited by the International Monetary Fund, the conflict is already affecting inflation and global growth.

But fully reopening the strait through military force alone is not realistic: it would be costly, slow, and risky. For this reason, Washington is not seeking to eliminate the threat entirely, but to reduce it to a level acceptable for commercial shipping.

The American Strategy: Pressure Without Escalation

Faced with these constraints, **the United States strategy** is taking a clear shape.

The goal is not to destroy Iran or overthrow the regime, but to compel it to negotiate through **Calibrated Coercive Diplomacy**: selectively degrading Iranian military capabilities, protecting energy routes, and applying military pressure while providing a political off-ramp.

In other words: **enough force to change Tehran's strategic calculus, but not enough to close off the space for negotiations.**

When the two-week truce expires, absent a mutually acceptable agreement, hostilities are set to resume. **The pause is being used operationally to reposition forces and plan the subsequent phases of the conflict.**

The exclusion of the Lebanese theater from the negotiating framework, according to the Israeli interpretation backed by Washington, has triggered the Iranian response through the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global energy traffic.

Should the interdiction of the strait continue beyond the start of peace talks in Pakistan, it could constitute a casus belli for the United States, legitimizing the resumption of military operations against Tehran with the aim of forcing an agreement on Western terms: regime survival, but with significantly reduced strategic capabilities and regional ambitions, including its nuclear component.

In this context, the blockade of Hormuz, combined with the failure of negotiations, would offer Washington a window of opportunity to expand the coalition by bringing in Gulf and European actors, reinforcing the narrative of Iran as the main destabilizing factor in the Middle Eastern theater.

From theory to practice: an operational option on the ground

In this context, **the most coherent tactical option for Washington would be to further reduce Iran's remaining missile and UAV capabilities and make transit through the Strait of Hormuz possible at acceptable risk levels.**

This operational sequence represents the balance point between military effectiveness and strategic sustainability, with the **neutralization of "missile cities"** as its decisive element. Indeed, despite the damage sustained, Iran retains several critical underground facilities, located mainly in the Zagros Mountains and the country's northeast.

These are deeply buried complexes (more than 100 meters), characterized by multiple protected access points, rapid launch and repositioning capability (shoot-and-scoot), layered defenses (infantry, SHORAD, artillery), engineer support, and mined areas.

These facilities **cannot be fully neutralized by air power alone**, even with the use of bunker busters. **Operational implication: the need for targeted ground raids.**

Phase 1 - Shaping and battlespace isolation

Before ground insertion, a shaping campaign would be conducted:

- SEAD/DEAD against air defenses
- interdiction within ~50 km of the sites
- neutralization of access routes
- clearance of insertion zones

Objective: achieve local superiority and tactical isolation.

Phase 2 - Ground insertion and maneuver

Insertion options would include air assaults for targets near the Iraqi border and airborne operations (likely involving elements of the 82nd Airborne Division) for deeper objectives. Activities would be **U.S.-led, with specialized Israeli support**, particularly for underground combat and advanced breaching.

Such operations would be supported by extensive and deep battlespace surveillance (Named Areas of Interest - NAI and Target Areas of Interest - TAI) conducted by satellite systems and UAS directly linked to counterfire assets, in order to limit or eliminate the threat posed by artillery, UAS, and missile fire. **A decisive element would be the seizure of airfields and the establishment of FARP** (Forward Arming and Refueling Points)

Objective: ground seizure of forward bases

Phase 3 - Consolidation of Support/Fire Bases and neutralization of Missile Cities

A decisive element would be the seizure of airfields and the establishment of FARP (Forward Arming and Refueling Points). The forces would be organized into:

- security and logistics support component (including C-UAS)
- HIMARS/ATACMS deep-strike fires component

- assault component for neutralizing underground missile complexes. The attack would be conducted along multiple axes, using breaching techniques to avoid main entrances presumed to be booby-trapped.

Iranian response and air superiority: Iranian armored forces, if forced to concentrate for a counterattack, would become vulnerable to U.S./Israeli air superiority.

This dynamic would favor Western tactical dominance.

Objective: neutralization of Missile Cities

Phase 5 - Security of the Strait of Hormuz

Once missile capabilities have been degraded:

- the United States Marine Corps could conduct amphibious operations
- occupation of strategic islands and coastal areas

Objective: establish a maritime security corridor.

Operational Challenges and Attrition: The Cost of Maritime Control

The mission's effectiveness also depends on the ability to manage remaining challenges, particularly the threat posed by **naval mines**. This scenario would make the deployment of advanced *Mine Countermeasures* (MCM) capabilities essential, an area in which the contribution of European allies would represent the missing piece for the coalition's success. In terms of resources, an operation of this scale—estimated at approximately **20,000 personnel**—would have to confront an extremely determined enemy resistance, with significant losses projected at no less than **10%**. Although the initiative is considered sustainable from a strictly military standpoint, its implementation remains an issue of extreme political sensitivity, where every human loss weighs heavily on the conflict's narrative.

The Strategic Outcome: Toward Coercive Diplomacy

The operation's ultimate objective is not total victory or the overthrow of the Iranian system, but the creation of a **negotiating window** based on controlled pressure. In doctrinal terms, this is a strategy of limited *coercive diplomacy* and *escalation dominance*.

For the United States, success would mean restoring energy security and degrading the local threat; for Iran, regime survival and sanctions relief would represent the way out to avoid collapse.

From this perspective, **true victory is not measured by the square kilometers seized, but by the ability to alter the adversary's strategic calculus**, bringing it to the negotiating table without either side appearing definitively defeated in the global narrative.