

Gung-ho Trump is learning too late that war is a two-way street

● US president is bound to claim a 'beautiful victory', but energy prices will determine his future



Barry O'Halloran

The Greek historian Herodotus tells how the wealthy King Croesus of Lydia asked the Oracle at Delphi if he should attack the Persian Empire. The Oracle replied that if he attacked, he would destroy a great empire. Emboldened by this prophecy, Croesus invaded but was defeated — the great empire he destroyed was his own. Donald Trump may come to learn a somewhat similar lesson.

In the prelude to this war, US President Donald Trump offered no strategic or tactical objective for his attack on Iran, site of the former Persian empire. Once it began, the goals seemed to shift from day to day. He is about to learn that a war without clear aims can easily become a war without end.

After a lot of initial mixed messaging, he seems to have settled on the goals of his war as destroying Iran's nuclear programme (again), along with its missile capabilities, with regime change as an add-on benefit. But as Croesus found out, war is an uncertain enterprise.

Make no mistake about it, this is Trump's war. He pursued it against the advice of both his top military adviser, General Dan Caine, and his National Security Council.

Meanwhile, Iran has appointed Mojtaba Khamenei, the 56-year-old son of the previous supreme leader. He lost his mother, his wife and one of his children when his father was assassinated on the first day of the war. A more hardline figure could hardly be imagined.

For two weeks, Iran has been pounded by the US and Israeli air forces. Yet the survival of the Islamic Republic, in even a severely debilitated form, will be sufficient for it to claim victory. If anything, such a regime will be even more determined to take revenge on "Western imperialism" and its Gulf neighbours.

Its Revolutionary Guard will seek to exact retribution in any way it can: firstly on its own people, then its neighbours, and, of course, on its despised enemy, Israel. It will drop the fiction of "peaceful" nuclear development and go hell-for-leather to deliver an atomic weapon.

Paradoxically, Trump will also claim victory — a military one. In a US mid-term election year, a victory lap will prove far too tempting for such a vain-glorious president. However, having sown the wind, the ensuing whirlwind might well blow Trump and much else away. Whatever emerges from the resultant chaos, a democratic Iran is highly unlikely.

In 1956, the Suez crisis was a stunning military achievement. The Egyptian air force was destroyed on the ground and its tank regiments decimated from the air. France and Britain, along with Israel, quickly established air dominance and met all their military objectives.

Yet Suez became a byword for geopolitical failure because spooked capital markets caused dire economic consequences. Suez put the final nail in the coffin of the British Empire and allowed the US to emerge as the global superpower. The lesson of Suez, that unintended economic consequences can upend the best-laid military plans, is about to be re-learned by the Trump administration.

Today, it is oil markets that have become spooked. Although crude oil prices have gyrated on a daily basis, the trend is relentlessly upward — a fact that is being registered at the pumps almost in real-time. As consumers go about their daily lives — driving to work, school, or the supermarket — they experience constant reminders of this fact.

Well over half of Iran's revenues come from oil and gas. About 70pc of this is handled on a tiny speck of land in the Persian Gulf called Kharg Island, which Trump yesterday claimed to have "totally obliterated". In a post on Truth Social, he claimed that the US air force had "executed one of the most powerful bombing raids in the history of the Middle East". In retaliation, Iran struck a vital oil-export hub in the United Arab Emirates. This escalation could cause global oil markets to go into "cardiac arrest" and the price of crude oil to go stratospheric — at least in the short term until the dust begins to settle.

There is an inverse relationship between the price of gas and Trump's poll numbers that will cause the president to rethink the continuation of this war sooner rather than later. The mullahs know this and have adopted a simple but effective strategy: keep the price of crude oil high enough for long enough to cause Trump severe electoral pain. To that end, they are deploying two tactics over which they still have very considerable control.



● Donald Trump ignored advice from his National Security Council

First, the critical chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz has been taken hostage by Iran: 20pc of global crude oil

once passed through here, but that has been reduced to a trickle. This was achieved in just two weeks by a combination of drones, mines, missiles and underwater drone boats. Up to a thousand vessels remain at anchor and unable to pass safely through the strait. The few that have tried have been attacked and, in some cases, badly damaged. US offers of maritime insurance and naval escorts have not convinced ship owners to risk either their vessels or the lives of their crews.

Last Wednesday, Iran warned that it "will never allow even a single litre of oil to pass through the Strait of Hormuz". Were the military planners at the Pentagon so dazzled by the superiority of their military technology that they failed to realise the risks this narrow 21-mile strait posed to their whole strategy?

by more Iranian missiles than even Israel. These attacks, along with a growing lack of storage capacity, have forced the closure of oil fields in all of these Gulf states. This has serious medium-term implications for the price of oil.

For reasons to do with the particularities of "oil reservoir physics", if these oil fields remain closed for more than a few weeks, getting them back to full production could take months. While statements by Pete Hegseth, the US secretary of war, give the impression he thinks he's in a *Top Gun* movie, his commander-in-chief must know that this war now has the potential to cause serious electoral trouble. US voters already preoccupied with "affordability" will not take kindly to being hit by large hikes in energy prices.

In these circumstances, losing both the House and the Senate in the mid-terms and becoming a lame-duck president for the final two years of his term is a real prospect. Forced to choose between defeating Iran and electoral Armageddon, Trump will do as Trump does. He will lie brazenly, claim a "beautiful" victory, and abandon the war.

If so, they need to recalibrate

quickly. It must be apparent by now that even a severely debilitated Iranian regime could still control the Strait of Hormuz for months using cheap drones, and short-range missiles, of which they have plenty.

The second tactic Iran is using to keep oil prices elevated is the targeting of oil production facilities across the Gulf states. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and especially the UAE, have all been targeted extensively by Iranian drones and missiles.

The UAE, considered by Iran to be an apostate regime, has been struck

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If he had read *Herodotus' Histories*, however, he would have discovered what Croesus found out the hard way: war is a two-way street that is paved with unintended consequences. But that is probably asking way too much of a president who distains advice and relies almost completely on his instincts.