Iran's Missile-Drone Campaign and Its Implications for the United States' Deterrence

By
Tahir Mahmood Azad

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The ongoing conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel has produced one of the most significant case studies in the evolution of contemporary warfare. Iran, a state that lacks a competitive air force and possesses limited naval power, has demonstrated that ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial systems can offset some conventional disadvantages and impose serious costs on technologically superior adversaries. This development is not confined to the battlefield. It represents a doctrinal shift with lasting implications for American deterrence strategy, allied defense planning, and the long-term viability of current U.S. force structures. Understanding what Iran has and has not achieved is essential for making sound policy going forward.

The Cost-Exchange Problem

At the operational level, Iran's most consequential contribution has been exposing a structural vulnerability in layered air defense: the cost-exchange dilemma. Systems such as Patriot, THAAD, and Iron Dome were engineered to intercept high-value ballistic and cruise missile threats. When deployed against coordinated waves of low-cost drones and short-range missiles, these systems are forced to expend interceptors valued at hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars per shot against threats that cost a fraction of that amount. The arithmetic is unsustainable at scale. As analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies have noted, saturation attacks can exhaust defensive inventories faster than replenishment is possible, creating windows of vulnerability that adversaries are quick to exploit. For the United States, this is not merely a technical problem, it is a strategic one that requires urgent attention in both procurement and doctrine.

The development of the Golden Dome missile defense architecture and expanded investment in directed energy and electronic warfare systems reflect growing official awareness that current interception models are not cost-competitive. These are necessary steps. However, technology alone cannot resolve a dilemma that is fundamentally about the economics of offense versus defense. Adversaries will adapt their tactics faster than procurement cycles can respond unless the U.S. also changes the strategic logic driving their calculations.

Attrition Without Decision: The Limits of the Iranian Model

The Iranian approach has imposed genuine costs on its adversaries, but it has not produced decisive military outcomes. This distinction is critical. Iran's missile and drone campaigns have disrupted logistics, strained defensive inventories, and created operational uncertainty. They have not, however, defeated U.S. or Israeli military power, seized or held territory, or forced a negotiated settlement on Iranian terms. The model is one of strategic attrition, not strategic victory. Survivability and persistence are not equivalent to effectiveness, and the broader narrative of a drone revolution rendering conventional military power obsolete requires significant qualification.

The claim that air superiority is no longer a necessary condition for strategic effectiveness also warrants scrutiny. Air superiority remains essential for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; for close air support of ground operations; and for denying adversaries freedom of movement. What Iran's campaign demonstrates is that a state without air superiority can still impose costs and delay adversary operations—not that air power has been rendered irrelevant. The bar for what air superiority can guarantee has been raised. Its strategic value, however, has not disappeared. Policymakers and analysts should resist the temptation to draw sweeping conclusions from a conflict that remains ongoing and whose full operational record is still emerging.

Implications for American Deterrence

The proliferation of precision strike capabilities across state and non-state actors undermines the assumption that technological overmatch alone is sufficient to deter conflict. When adversaries can field asymmetric capabilities that challenge U.S. and allied defenses at an acceptable cost to themselves, deterrence by denial becomes increasingly difficult to guarantee. The U.S. must prioritize cost-effective interception technologies, particularly directed energy weapons, that can neutralize mass drone and missile attacks without depleting high-value interceptor stocks. This is a resource allocation problem as much as it is an engineering one, and it demands serious engagement at the budgetary and strategic planning levels.

The Iranian model is also exportable, and this may prove to be its most consequential long-term dimension. States with limited defense budgets that are aligned with China or Russia can observe the operational lessons from this conflict and apply them in their own regional contexts. The proliferation of domestically produced or externally transferred missile and drone capabilities across the Middle East, South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific represents a compounding deterrence challenge. American extended deterrence commitments to allies in these regions will become harder to sustain if the cost-exchange problem is not structurally resolved. As Defense News reported, the proliferation of drone technology is already forcing militaries worldwide to reconsider their approach to air and missile defense.

There is also a crisis stability dimension that deserves serious attention. Rapid, sustained missile and drone strikes compress decision-making timelines and increase pressure for early, and potentially disproportionate, responses. In a multipolar environment where multiple actors possess similar strike capabilities, the risk of miscalculation is elevated. The U.S. should pursue updated arms control frameworks and diplomatic mechanisms to manage the proliferation of these systems alongside its technical and procurement investments. Deterrence cannot be reduced to hardware alone.

Conclusion

Iran's missile and drone campaign has not rewritten the principles of warfare, but it has exposed critical assumptions underpinning American deterrence in ways that cannot be ignored. Distributed, low-cost, high-impact systems are now accessible to a wider range of actors and the gap between offensive capability and defensive cost is widening. The United States requires a

deterrence posture that integrates cost-effective defense, credible offensive options, active non-proliferation diplomacy, and sustained alliance management. Meeting this challenge demands strategic adaptation across doctrine, procurement, and diplomacy, not simply an incremental increase in interceptor production.

Dr. Tahir Mahmood Azad is currently a research scholar at the Department of Politics & International Relations, the University of Reading, UK. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.