

Arithmetic of Power Hegemony and Iran: Why the US May Not Be Able to Sustain the Old Order



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What should concern the White House more, however, is whether Americans are prepared to accept this recalibrated meaning of MAGA, one that countenances selective foreign entanglements in the name of sustaining American primacy and hegemony.



A damaged car remains on the ground in the aftermath of an Israeli-U.S. strike in Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026. Photo: AP /PTI

After a **massive naval buildup** in the Gulf and adjacent theatres over recent weeks, the United States and Israel launched a coordinated military offensive against the Iranian Regime on February 28.

Large-scale **protests erupted** across **multiple capitals**, condemning what demonstrators described as US-Israeli escalation. More critical for Washington, however, **was the backlash at home**, where sections of the American public questioned both the legal basis and strategic rationale of the operation.

What may be more politically consequential for the White House is how this escalation resonates domestically.

Recent polling indicates that a substantial share of Americans do not favour military action against Iran and remain sceptical of further foreign intervention, a stance in alignment with the 'America First' Narrative which formed the core of **Trump's campaign trail**, but now appears increasingly at odds with.

The debate is not only about war fatigue or fiscal strain; it is about the credibility of international law when its **principal architect** appears willing to test its limits.

Maritime arteries and monetary power: The structural stakes in West Asia

The White House has justified the military operation on several fronts.

US officials have cited Iran's expanding **nuclear enrichment activities** and advances in **ballistic missile development** as direct threats to regional and global security, and they have portrayed Tehran's refusal to halt these programmes as evidence that diplomacy had failed.

Brutal suppression of domestic protests has also been cited as a backdrop to the decision, framing the offensive as responding to both internal repression and an escalating external threat, aimed at eradicating tyranny in Tehran.

While the official rationale invites scrutiny, it would be reductive to ignore the structural and geoeconomic incentives underlying a potential US intervention in Iran, particularly given Israel's enduring strategic contest with Tehran despite **degrading proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah**.

Escalation toward Iran signals not merely tactical retaliation but an effort to recalibrate the regional balance in ways that widen Israeli strategic latitude. Yet the region's geoeconomic weight and critical geography suggest that the calculus extends beyond immediate security concerns to a broader restructuring of power across West Asia.

Roughly **a fifth of globally traded crude and gas-tankers** pass through the Strait of Hormuz, while **10–12% of global trade transits the Bab-el-Mandeb**, a maritime chokepoint threatened by **Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen**.

Iran's strategic weight stems as much from this geography as from its **vast hydrocarbon reserves** of crude oil and natural gas. Even under sanctions, Tehran's proximity to vital sea lanes gives it asymmetric disruption capacity raising insurance costs, unsettling tanker traffic and injecting energy volatility.

From Washington's vantage point, the incentive structure is therefore about risk compression rather than resource capture. Degrading Iran's naval and missile capabilities secures transit flows and preserves predictable energy corridors within a US-anchored maritime order.

Iran also sits at the intersection of currency politics and sanctions enforcement. Its **25-year cooperation framework with China** and the **gradual expansion of yuan-settled crude transactions outside SWIFT-linked channels** position Tehran as a testing ground for partial de-dollarisation.

Curtailing Iran's export flexibility therefore reinforces the credibility of U.S. secondary sanctions and the dominance of dollar-based clearing, less a petrodollar thesis than a question of sustaining financial coercive capacity, imperative to protect **amid rising U.S. debt**.

The spillovers are equally strategic. **Iranian drones have featured in the Russia-Ukraine War**, making Tehran a supplementary node in Moscow's supply chain.

Degrading Iran constrains that channel, complicates Beijing's energy diversification strategy, and potentially narrows India's connectivity ambitions to Central Asia and Russia via Chabahar, embedding the conflict within wider US-China competition rather than isolating it as a regional crisis.

In conjunction with shifting alignments in Pakistan, a diminished Iran could enhance U.S. strategic depth in the subcontinent and reinforce its influence over the Gulf's energy architecture.

The crisis of norms in a post-bipolar world: An unaffordable order

While a US-aligned Tehran may promise strategic advantages, it would entail significant costs, though the cost may well be deliberate.

With the legality of the US intervention in Iran already under **scrutiny**, it is both ironic and consequential that the principal architect of the modern rules-based order now finds itself accused of testing its limits.

The post-1945 institutional framework, most notably the United Nations, emerged substantially through American diplomatic leadership, with President **Franklin D. Roosevelt himself coining the term "United Nations"**.

The US was central even to the drafting of the UN charter which was finalised only in the **San Francisco Conference (1945)**.

Yet, the legally unjustified military intervention by U.S. in Iran has violated [Article 2\(1\), 2\(4\) & 51 of the U.N. Charter](#), [Article 51 and 57 of the Additional Protocol 1 of Geneva Convention](#) and the landmark precedent of [Nicaragua vs United States \(1986\)](#) as the military involvement neither rose in self-defence nor with the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

This appears less as an episodic violation of the rules-based order and more as a conscious refusal to operate within an architecture perceived as no longer aligned with American interests.

The bipolar structure for which the rules-based order was designed no longer exists; it has given way to a hybrid system marked by diffused multilateral power centres alongside a still-dominant unilateral actor.

The [United Nations system](#), built around juridical parity among states, sits uneasily with extended phases of asymmetric power concentration in Washington especially against a weakened Russia.

International law, in this reading, appears less simply violated than selectively set aside much as Washington has distanced itself from bodies such as the [World Health Organisation](#), [the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), and [the United Nations Human Rights Council](#) when perceived to constrain American interests.

The theatre at home: Has MAGA collapsed or been redefined?

American voters supported Trump under the MAGA banner on an explicit “America First” promise central to which was the assurance that the United States would [avoid entanglement in foreign wars](#).

Yet rather than privileging domestic reconstruction, his approach appears oriented toward sustaining American primacy abroad, aligning more closely with the interventionist posture associated with figures such as Marco Rubio.

[Recent polling](#) makes it abundantly clear that a significant share of Americans oppose US involvement in a war with Iran, aligning broadly with sentiments emphasised by [J.D. Vance’s war-aversion stance](#) rather than interventionist agendas.

The real question is whether Trump has abandoned MAGA or is redefining it.

For both J.D. Vance and Marco Rubio, “America First” retains central value but with divergent meanings. [Vance prioritises domestic repair](#) and strategic restraint; [Rubio](#)

emphasises shaping the emerging world order and preserving American primacy reflective in his recent speech in Munich Security Conference.

The goal of American greatness and control remain shared, but the methods differ. Trump appears to have aligned more closely with Rubio's interpretation, even as many voters continue to adhere to MAGA's original promise of retrenchment.

What should concern the White House more, however, is whether Americans are prepared to accept this recalibrated meaning of MAGA, one that countenances selective foreign entanglements in the name of sustaining American primacy and hegemony.

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