

The secret of Iran's resilience

Hindol Sengupta • April 24, 2026,

Is Iran winning against America because it is a civilizational state?



The Persian sense of civilisational greatness — expressed through poetry, philosophy, and a proud historical narrative — predates Islam and has persisted through Arab, Mongol, and Timurid conquests. Image: Reuters

In late March 2026, Sir Alex Younger, the former chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service MI6, made a striking admission to *The Economist*. Despite spending a career confronting the violence of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, he concluded that Iran held the upper hand in its war against the United States and Israel. Among the reasons he offered was that Donald Trump had said things that confirmed what Iranians already believed — that they are fighting a civilisational war, a war of existence, while America had embarked on a war of choice. In those terms, Younger argued that asymmetry of purpose had given Iran more staying power.

This observation, striking from a man of Younger's background, is not new to students of war and history. It reflects a deep pattern in the record of human conflict: nations and peoples animated by a sense of civilisational identity — rooted in a long history, a coherent culture, and a belief that their very existence is at stake — tend to demonstrate extraordinary resilience when confronted with materially superior adversaries. This essay argues that civilisational self-conception functions as a force multiplier in conflict, drawing on historical, strategic, and cultural theory to make the case.

The intellectual architecture for this argument begins with Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations* and the *Remaking of World Order* (1996), which controversially but presciently argued that the primary axis of post-Cold War conflict would not be ideological or economic but civilisational — defined by culture, religion, and historical memory. Whatever one makes of Huntington's prescriptions, his descriptive insight holds considerable power: identity rooted in civilisational depth provides cohesion that transient political or economic interests cannot replicate.

More directly relevant is the work of military historian Martin van Creveld, particularly *The Transformation of War* (1991), which argued that the dominant form of modern conflict is not between states pursuing rational interests but between groups fighting for identity, culture, and survival. In such conflicts, the side with the deeper sense of existential purpose tends to outlast the side fighting for strategic objectives. Van Creveld's concept of "trinitarian war" — the state, the army, and the people — collapses in asymmetric conflict unless the people are genuinely mobilised by something they believe is worth dying for.

This connects to the ancient insight in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832) that war is never merely a military act but a continuation of politics — and politics, at its deepest, is an expression of collective will. Clausewitz identified morale and the will to fight as among the most decisive elements in conflict, often overwhelming material advantage.

Few cases illustrate civilisational resilience more starkly than Vietnam. The United States brought to bear the most sophisticated military machine in history against North Vietnam — overwhelming air power, economic resources, and technological superiority. Yet by 1975, the last American personnel had fled Saigon. Why?

The Vietnamese communist leadership, led by Ho Chi Minh and later Le Duan, consistently framed the conflict not as a proxy Cold War struggle but as the latest chapter in a thousand-year civilisational resistance to foreign domination — from Chinese dynasties to French colonialism. This narrative was not merely propaganda; it was historically grounded. As the American strategist Andrew Krepinevich noted in *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), the US fundamentally misread the conflict as a conventional military problem rather than a political and cultural one. The North Vietnamese, by contrast, operated from what Ho Chi Minh called the "long-term

struggle”, rooted in the conviction that civilisational endurance would outlast American impatience. General Vo Nguyen Giap made this explicit: the enemy would tire before Vietnam would yield.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan beginning in 1979 offers another paradigmatic case. The Soviet Union deployed the second most powerful military on earth against a largely pre-industrial society. Within a decade, it had withdrawn in humiliation — a defeat widely cited as a contributing factor in the Soviet collapse itself.

The Mujahideen’s resilience drew explicitly on a civilisational and religious identity — the concept of jihad as sacred duty, the Pashtunwali code of honour, and an unbroken history of resisting outside conquerors going back to Alexander the Great. Anthropologist David Edwards, in *Before Taliban* (2002), showed how resistance fighters drew on deep wells of cultural memory that gave the conflict a meaning that Soviet material inducements and military pressure could not erode. The Soviets were fighting for a geopolitical buffer state; the Afghans believed they were fighting for their souls.

The People’s Republic of China presents a somewhat different but equally instructive case. The concept of the “Century of Humiliation” — from the First Opium War (1839) to the founding of the PRC in 1949 — is not merely a historical grievance; it is a living civilisational narrative that shapes Chinese strategic culture and resilience. As Graham Allison argues in *Destined for War* (2017), Chinese strategic thinking operates on a civilisational timescale fundamentally alien to Western electoral cycles and quarterly planning. Mao Zedong’s willingness to absorb catastrophic losses in the Korean War (1950–53), including potentially over a million casualties, reflected a calculus rooted in civilisational endurance rather than rational cost-benefit analysis by Western standards.

Henry Kissinger, in *On China* (2011), observed that Chinese strategic thought — shaped by Confucian philosophy, centuries of statecraft, and the experience of cyclical imperial rise and fall — has always prioritised long-term positioning over short-term advantage. Nations that carry this depth, he suggested, play a fundamentally different game.

Iran is one of the world's oldest continuous civilisations, with a cultural identity stretching back to the Achaemenid Empire of the 6th century BCE. The Persian sense of civilisational greatness — expressed through poetry, philosophy, and a proud historical narrative — predates Islam and has persisted through Arab, Mongol, and Timurid conquests. As Vali Nasr argued in *The Shia Revival* (2006), Iranian political culture fuses Persian civilisational pride with Shia Islamic theology in ways that create an unusually potent identity, one in which suffering and resistance have deep theological resonance in the martyrdom tradition of Imam Hussein at Karbala.

When Sir Alex Younger observed that Iran believes it is fighting a civilisational war, he was identifying something real and historically grounded. Iran played a weak hand well, globalising the conflict through horizontal escalation and the energy war in ways that gave it leverage disproportionate to its military capacity. This capacity to absorb punishment and adapt reflects a civilisational inheritance of resilience — a people who have outlasted every empire that sought to subdue them.

What unites Vietnam, Afghanistan, China, and Iran is the asymmetry Younger identified between a war of existence and a war of choice. Bernard Fall, writing about French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in *Hell in a Very Small Place* (1966), observed that the French were fighting for colonial pride, while the Viet Minh were fighting for their civilisational future. That asymmetry of stakes determined the outcome as surely as any tactical factor.

This is not to romanticise such resilience. Civilisational narratives have also fuelled extremism and intractable conflict. Nor does civilisational identity guarantee victory — history is full of civilisations that perished. But in the specific context of asymmetric conflict, where a materially superior power confronts a society animated by existential purpose, the historical evidence is consistent: depth of identity, cultural memory, and the conviction that one is fighting for civilisational survival confer a resilience that airstrikes, sanctions, and superior firepower struggle to extinguish.

The lesson for strategists and policymakers is sobering, and Sir Alex Younger, reluctantly and honestly, has now lived it. When a nation believes it is fighting not for a government or a policy but for its very soul and its place in history, it becomes, in a precise military sense, a more formidable adversary than raw capability alone would suggest. Civilisations remember what armies forget.

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