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War in Iran is making Donald Trump weaker—and angrier

By diminishing the president’s political superpowers, his reckless campaign may make him more dangerous

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NEVER BET against Donald Trump. No politician can defy political gravity like the man whose supporters stormed the Capitol on January 6th 2021, only for him to be re-elected in 2024 with a bigger share of the vote. And yet it is hard to imagine a crisis more precisely engineered to intercept the trajectory of his presidency than his ill-judged, heedless war against Iran. Even a short war will alter the course of his second term. One that lasts months could bring it crashing to earth.

The reason is that the fight against Iran diminishes Mr Trump’s three political superpowers: his ability to impose his own reality on the world, his remorseless use of leverage and his dominion over the Republican Party. Even without Iran, the potency of these Trumpian strengths was likely to wane after the midterm elections. Wars accelerate change.

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Start with *Trump v Reality*. In politics, the president has shown a remarkable ability to twist facts and, sure enough, he insists that he has already triumphed in Iran. Yet the war tells a truth of its own. Iran’s regime cannot win in any conventional sense. But despite widespread destruction of infrastructure and the assassinations of senior leaders—including the security chief, Ali Larijani—Iran’s regime survives for now and its 400kg or so of near-bomb-ready uranium remains at large.

What is more, Iran is waging its own parallel war against the global energy industry. As it strikes shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the infrastructure of its neighbours, the markets are keeping score. With Brent crude spiking to more than \$110 a barrel on March 18th, following an Iranian missile attack on a Qatari natural-gas hub, the regime will conclude that its strategy is working.

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If anything, time is on Iran’s side. America and Israel will gradually run out of useful targets to strike from the air, or run low on interceptor batteries to see off Iranian weapons. By contrast, Iran appears still to have plenty of drones. For as long as it restricts traffic in the strait, oil prices will climb and the damage to the world economy will grow.

Mr Trump’s second superpower is leverage. Now that other countries’ leaders have come to expect rough treatment, they are learning how to resist. When the president called on America’s allies to help open the strait, warning that NATO faced a “very bad” future if they refused, they turned him down. He quickly reversed course, pretending he had never needed help.

Likewise, Iran is opposing Mr Trump by accumulating leverage against him. In recent days it has signalled that it will grant safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz to ships from friendly countries—a sign that it means to use access as a bargaining tool. Even if Mr Trump wants to end the war, Iran could continue to fire at ships. If the waterway remains closed until the end of April, the oil price could reach \$150 a barrel.

Given that leverage, Iran may hold out for more than just a return to the status quo before the war. It may ask for sanctions to be lifted, or an American commitment to abandon some bases in the Middle East or to restrain Israel. If recession looms in America and stockmarkets start to fall, would Mr Trump escalate by, say, seizing Kharg island, home to Iran’s export terminals? Or would he buckle?

The answer depends partly on the last of his powers: his hold on his party. Mr Trump was elected on promises to spare voters from war and inflation. So far, 13 American service personnel have died; ground operations inside Iran, to recover that uranium, or on Kharg would put many more in danger. Average prices of petrol and diesel have reached \$3.88 and \$5.09 a gallon, compared with \$3.11 and \$3.72 at Mr Trump’s inauguration. Republican support for the war is strong, but softening. A vocal faction of MAGA, notably Tucker Carlson ([interviewed on “The Insider”](#), our video show, this week), talks of betrayal.

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In private [many elected Republicans are seething](#). Mr Trump’s failure to heed warnings about the Strait of Hormuz is typical of his contempt for strategy and his hubris in thinking he knows better than people who really do. Republicans are now highly likely to [lose control of the House](#) in the midterm elections in November. Their chances of losing the Senate too have risen by ten points, to about 50%. The worse the defeat, the lamer a duck the president will be and the less influence he will have over who inherits the party.

Were the war to drag on, leading to very high oil prices and tumbling stockmarkets, Mr Trump could seek a way out and look for a win somewhere else—in, say, Cuba. Markets would doubtless register relief if the fighting stopped. But Mr Trump is not in full control of this war. Iran’s attack on the gas hub in Qatar shows it still has cards to play. And even if the fighting ended tomorrow it could take four to six weeks to restore oil production, four to eight weeks to settle oil markets and two months to normalise shipping. The risk of renewed Iranian action would remain. Prices may stay high for months. Every day they do weakens the president.

Mr Trump’s politics depends on the strength that comes from winning. If he seems a loser, expect him to exact retribution. A weaker president could become a more dangerous one.

Tanking

Mr Trump is freest to act abroad. He may abandon NATO. He may cut Ukraine loose to punish Europe. He could bully Latin America in the name of fighting crime and drugs. He may demand money for defending Japan and South Korea. He will be maximalist on tariffs. Even if he does not succeed, that will further erode America’s alliances, to the glee of China and Russia.

But Mr Trump is also liable to lash out at home. He has already endorsed the idea of withholding broadcasting licences from media outlets that criticise the war. He wants the Federal Reserve to slash rates, but his war makes that less likely—expect further clashes with the central bank. He could target perceived enemies or send immigration agents to more Democratic-run cities. He could threaten to meddle in the midterms, either as theatre to rile his opponents, or because he intends to influence the results. It is hard to see how Mr Trump ends up a winner in Iran. Be warned: he makes up a very bad loser. ■

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