Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The "Trump Doctrine" is neither a doctrine nor unique to Trump

US Vice President J.D. Vance recently tried to cast President Donald Trump's strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure as a wildly successful example of the "Trump Doctrine."

According to Vance, the doctrine is simple: you identify a problem that threatens US interests, which "you try to aggressively diplomatically solve." If diplomacy fails, "you use overwhelming military power to solve it and then you get the hell out of there before it ever becomes a protracted conflict."

If only it were that easy. What Vance describes is neither a doctrine nor unique to Trump.

It is the same wishful thinking that produced many of the long, costly, and unsuccessful US military interventions that Vance himself has often decried.

If Vance thinks that the strikes "solved" the problem of Iran's nuclear program, then he must believe that they fully destroyed Iran's nuclear capabilities: its centrifuges, its stocks of enriched uranium, and any other materials used for weaponization.

Either that, or he views this display of America's military might as powerful enough to persuade the Islamic Republic to abandon its nuclear program and not reconstitute it in the future.

There is no question that the US strike severely damaged the Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan nuclear facilities.

But it is far from clear that the bombing of these sites, coupled with Israel's assassination of senior Iranian nuclear scientists, has set Iran back to zero.

It appears more likely that Iran's program has only been delayed, though estimates of the setback vary from months to years.

Unless and until there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that Iran's nuclear program was completely obliterated, then Vance must rely on the belief that, as US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth put it, "American

deterrence is back."

"Shock and awe"

The Trump administration is not the first to be tempted by the idea that short, sharp displays of military strength can convince other countries to capitulate to US demands.

Since achieving its unquestioned military primacy in 1990, the United States has compiled a long record of such attempts, many of which failed.

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Throughout the 1990s, Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq endured multiple US-led bombing campaigns for repeatedly obstructing International Atomic Energy Agency and United Nations weapons inspectors.

This cycle, as Vance knows well, culminated in 2003 with America's "shock and awe" campaign, which set off a grinding eight-year war that killed thousands of US service members and roughly a half-million Iraqis.

Similarly, in the 1990s, NATO's threats, blockades, and shows of force did not deter Serbian President Slobodan Milošević from waging brutal wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

In particular, Milošević was unmoved by NATO's early bombing campaign in Kosovo, which was restricted to military targets and did not threaten his hold on power.

The air strikes that were supposed to last a matter of days ended up continuing for months without success. The presumption, in

other words, that simply bringing superior force to bear would convince Milošević to abandon a cause he was deeply committed to was dead wrong.

It was only when NATO shifted from targeting Serbian forces to targeting infrastructure in and around Belgrade – which threatened to undermine the Serbian elite's support for Milošević – that he agreed to leave Kosovo.

Inflicting pain on the US

Other targets have played possum when faced with US military threats, seeming to concede in the moment before resuming their unwanted behaviors weeks, months, or even years later.

North Korea has long taken this approach. Despite repeated reminders of the US military's overwhelming strength, the country eventually resorts to its old ways, issuing nuclear threats, conducting missile tests, launching satellites, and engaging in other provocations.

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China's behavior follows a similar pattern. In 2016, America successfully used an ostentatious joint military exercise to deter Chinese island building and claims around the Philippines.

But just a few months ago, the Chinese Coast Guard landed on an island that the Philippines claims as its own.

Still others have responded by inflicting pain on the US. The Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid found that killing a few Americans is all it takes for the world's most powerful military to back down.

A pillar of every president's doctrine

Iran seems willing to do all three. The Islamic Republic has displayed an ability to absorb both economic and military blows.

Its military provocations and nuclear activities have ebbed and flowed, sometimes in sync with – and other times irrespective of – the intensity of US responses.

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And as Iran expert Vali Nasr recently recounted, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei apparently shares Aidid's assessment, having told his advisers that "America is like a dog. If you back off, it will lunge at you, but if you lunge at it, it will recoil and back off."

It is understandable that Vance wants to believe – and wants Trump's anti-interventionist constituency to believe – that impressive demonstrations of the US military's reach and power are uniquely persuasive.

But if short-of-war displays of military power were sufficient to achieve US political objectives – especially ones as difficult to achieve as convincing Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions – then they would be a pillar of every president's doctrine.

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