

How a war on land comes to be fought at sea

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Phar Kim Beng

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To fathom how a crisis on Iranian soil has unfolded in the Strait of Hormuz and extended across the Gulf, one must first understand the Islamic republic's hardline strategy.

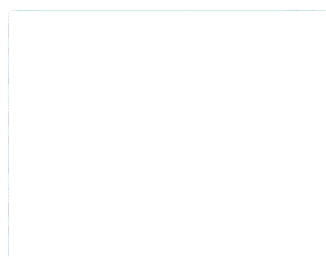


PHAR KIM BENG

Phar Kim Beng is Professor of ASEAN Studies and Director of IINTAS-IUM.

The world's fixation on the Strait of Hormuz obscures a more fundamental reality: Iran's hardline strategy is not maritime in origin. [📖 Water & Marine Sciences](#)

It is territorial, psychological, and deeply embedded in a doctrine of survival shaped on land. The tension at sea is merely its outward expression.



To understand this, one must again turn to the scholarship of Vali Nasr, who makes clear that Iran's strategic behaviour is rooted in the trauma of isolation and war.

Vali Nasr is a professor of strategic studies of Iran at the John's Hopkins University in Washington DC and was once special aide to the late US diplomat Richard Holbrooke when the latter was assigned to handling Afghanistan.

But beyond ideology, Iran's hardline posture has evolved into a highly structured military doctrine — one that explicitly targets American power where it is most vulnerable: its forward-deployed bases and strategic assets across West Asia.

This is the essence of Iran's "forward defence".

Rather than confront the United States directly on Iranian soil, Tehran projects deterrence outward. [📖 Politics \(Right\)](#)

It does so by developing the capability — and the willingness — to strike US bases, logistics hubs, and allied infrastructure across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as well as in Iraq.

Over the decades, economic sanctions of the US against Iran have ballooned from 350 to 1,700 measures.

In any Iranian response to the US, Tehran tends to be maximalist since the Gulf is laden with them. This is not incidental. It is deliberate. American military architecture in the region is extensive.

Bases in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates form the backbone of US power projection in West Asia.

Likewise, US installations in Iraq — though reduced from [📖 Maritime Transport](#)

To Iran, these are not merely defensive outposts. They are launchpads for regime change.  History)

Thus, in the Iranian strategic calculus, they become legitimate targets.

Iran's hardliners have therefore developed a layered deterrence strategy.

At its core lies the ability to retaliate asymmetrically through missile strikes, drone attacks, and proxy operations.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), alongside a network of aligned militias, provides Tehran with both deniability and reach.

This explains why periods of heightened tension often see calibrated attacks on US-linked assets in Iraq, or indirect pressure on Gulf states hosting American forces. These actions are not random escalations.

They are signals – carefully measured demonstrations of capability intended to impose costs without triggering full-scale war.

As one Iranian analyst in Tehran affirmed: “When Iran is attacked, the response of IRGC is not an eye for an eye. Rather for the neck and the legs too.”

The logic is straightforward: if the US can threaten Iran from bases encircling it, Iran must be able to threaten those very bases in return.

In this sense, Iran's strategy is both offensive and defensive – offensive in its willingness to strike beyond its borders; defensive in its underlying objective of deterring what it perceives as existential threats.

Nasr's analysis helps illuminate why this posture has hardened over time.

Each episode of confrontation – whether the Iran-Iraq  War, the US invasion of Iraq, or the collapse of the nuclear deal – has reinforced the belief within Iran's leadership that vulnerability invites aggression.

The lesson drawn is not to compromise, but to fortify. Including the determination to have a nuclear energy programme of its own.

Obliterated or otherwise, Iran is justifiably tenacious to want the nuclear potential, not necessarily weapons, to place itself ready to thwart any foreign military adventurism.

Evidently, attacks on US bases or strategic assets are not aberrations. They are embedded within Iran's doctrine.

Equally important is the role of proxies. By cultivating non-state actors across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Iran has created a buffer zone that allows it to engage in conflict without direct attribution.

These groups serve as extensions of Iran's strategic depth, capable of targeting US interests while complicating Washington's response calculus.

In Iraq in particular, this dynamic is pronounced. The presence of US forces – originally justified by counterterrorism objectives – has increasingly been viewed by Iranian-aligned factions as occupation.

As a result, US bases in Iraq have become frequent flashpoints, with attacks designed to signal both resistance and deterrence.

Across the Gulf, the situation is more complex. GCC states are simultaneously partners of the United States and neighbours of Iran.

Their hosting of US military assets places them in a precarious position – both shielded by American power and exposed to Iranian retaliation.

This creates a paradox: the very infrastructure meant to ensure regional stability becomes a source of instability.

It is in this context that the Strait of Hormuz must be reinterpreted. The waterway is not the starting point of conflict, but its extension.

When Iran signals through naval manoeuvres or selective disruptions, it is often reinforcing messages already conveyed through its land-based posture: that it possesses the means to escalate across multiple domains.

The sea, in other words, is theatre. The land is strategy.

For Washington, this presents a persistent dilemma. Conventional military superiority offers limited leverage against a dispersed, asymmetric threat network. Striking Iran directly risks regional escalation, ignoring provocations risks eroding deterrence.

This is why Iran's hardliners remain such a formidable challenge. They operate within a framework that is resilient, adaptive, and deeply informed by historical grievance.

To confront this strategy effectively, Washington must move beyond surface-level responses.

It must recognise that Iran's targeting of US bases and strategic assets is not simply aggression – it is part of a broader doctrine designed to offset perceived encirclement.

Without addressing that underlying perception, any effort

The Strait of Hormuz may capture global attention. But the real contest, as Vali Nasr reminds us, is anchored elsewhere: in the enduring logic of survival that drives Iran's hardliners to push back, wherever American power is most exposed.

The views expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of FMT.

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