



Letter n°149

The powerlessness of the hyperpower

“Americans have an immense opinion of themselves” and “are not very remote from believing themselves to be a distinct species of mankind.” Tocqueville

This remark by Tocqueville in his book *Democracy in America* aptly points to the hubris that can lead Americans toward irrationality. Before Trump, Clinton, in 1997, declared, “America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation,” and we recall Bush’s messianic approach in Iraq...

Iran has a GDP of \$400 billion; the United States, \$28 trillion, or 22 to 23% of global GDP. Iran has a military budget of around \$10 billion; the United States, \$950 billion, or more than half of global military spending. Iran is a country of 90 million people, with 40% below the poverty line; the United States is a country of 340 million with a high standard of living. Iran is a country under economic sanctions for years, thus weakened, facing official inflation above 50%; the United States is an economy boosted by investment in AI, accounting for nearly half of GDP growth, and has been stimulated for many years by a budget deficit often exceeding 6% of GDP. Iran is a country that has suffered more than \$250 billion in destruction in nearly 50 days of fighting, while the United States has spent a few tens of billions... And yet, notwithstanding these preliminary considerations, while the United States dominates militarily, it is incapable of winning this war; it is unable to impose its diplomatic agenda and is even being challenged by the Iranians.

This powerlessness of the hyperpower raises questions: the unsuitability of heavy American equipment to the guerrilla tactics employed by Iran, and the clear lag of the United States in the sophistication and use of drones. But that is not all.

Taking a step back, it should be recalled that since 1945, the United States has been involved in numerous conflicts but has rarely achieved victory (Part 1). And, in a second part, it will be shown that the American inability to operate effectively with its historical allies is accelerating the development of a multipolar world.

American difficulties in winning:

Since 1945, the United States has been involved in multiple conflicts, without success in wars, but with success in short interventions.

Among the wars, let us recall Korea from 1950 to 1953, Vietnam from 1961 to 1975, together with interventions in Laos (1964–73) and Cambodia (1969–70) at the same time, Iraq from 2003 to 2011, and Afghanistan from 2000 until the withdrawal completed by Biden in 2021.

Among the interventions, we may cite the successful raids in Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, the first to overthrow a pro-Soviet military government, the second to capture the dictator Noriega. One could add, in the same vein, the recent capture of Maduro.

There was also the famous intervention in the Bay of Pigs in Cuba in 1961, the intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, Bosnia in 1994–95 and Kosovo in 1999 – the latter two being purely aerial, much like the current war against Iran.

Finally, in the Middle East region, there were Libya in 1986 and in 2011 (only about ten days, in support of Great Britain and France), and Somalia between 1992 and 1995.

From this set of actions on foreign ground, few successes emerge: the Gulf War in 1990 against Saddam Hussein, but within the framework of a broad coalition that is lacking today in Iran; Grenada and Panama already mentioned, though they involved very small states. In Korea, American technological superiority made it possible to contain China's numerical superiority, but the result was merely an armistice – a freezing of positions, not a peace treaty.

In Korea, the Americans suffered 33,000 deaths and more than 100,000 wounded; in Vietnam, nearly 50,000 deaths and three times as many wounded; in Iraq, just under 4,000 deaths and more than 30,000 wounded; and in Afghanistan, 2,000 deaths and ten times as many wounded. Today, Americans no longer want to lose men, and their adversaries know it.

In summary, on each of these battlefields, American military, technological, and financial superiority has often failed to deliver a decisive victory – something that is evident again today in Iran – largely due to the absence of a clear strategy.

The acceleration of multipolarity:

Certainly, the United States has an active-duty military of 1.3 million personnel; certainly, it maintains 750 to 800 bases abroad, including 120 in Japan, 75 in South Korea, and others across some 120 countries; certainly, it has 200,000 troops stationed across these bases, with 40% in Europe. But this is not enough to slow its relative decline.

China has no allies but, to date, does not intervene in international conflicts. It continues to build up its military capabilities, establish methodical military footholds in the South China Sea (Spratly, Paracel...), and multiply economic dependencies along the Belt and Road routes.

Russia is wearing itself down in Ukraine, declining economically, being overtaken in Central Asia by Chinese activism, losing footholds in Syria and Venezuela, and perhaps tomorrow in Cuba and Iran, but remains the leading nuclear power, still attempting to assert itself in Africa and exert influence in Europe.

Europe and the other traditional allies of the United States – Canada, Japan, South Korea – are awakening, increasing their military budgets, and beginning to learn to do without the American umbrella.

In the Global South, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Brazil, as well as Indonesia, Pakistan, and other smaller countries, are realising that they can play a role on the international stage. The disruptive capacity of a country as economically weakened as Iran on the global economy is opening the eyes of many nations.

Conclusion: “Move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical.” Sun Tzu.

Trump would have done well to reflect on this wise remark by the Chinese thinker Sun Tzu, as he has much to lose in this conflict:

- An indirect winner of this war: China:

China, dependent on Iranian oil for 14% of its supplies before the conflict, provides support to its partner in the form of equipment and satellite imagery, as it is concerned about the closure of the strait. However, it remains cautious and must ensure it does not offend its other suppliers in the Middle East, as 14% of its imported oil comes from Saudi Arabia, 6% from the UAE, 7% from Oman, and 10% from Iraq.

With very large crude reserves, it can, in the short term, better absorb the crisis than countries such as India, Vietnam, or the Philippines.

From a strategic perspective, it will continue to reduce its reliance on the dollar, capitalise on its image as a peaceful power, and increase pressure on Taiwan.

- *The United States has radicalised the Iranian regime and damaged its image:*

The macabre excesses, buffoonery, erratic and untimely statements by Trump, his provocations and exaggerations, are causing dismay even within his own camp. But beyond Trump, for several decades, the American population has grown weary of the adventurism of its leaders abroad.

In Iran, the religious authorities appear sidelined, but the regime persists, does not seem to be fundamentally challenged by Trump, and is intensifying repression against an exhausted population.

Globally, American unilateralism is increasingly contested, and the United States appears more and more isolated. Trump has alienated the indispensable support of allies in the West, the Middle East, and Asia; and although the United States accounts for more than half of global military spending, this is not enough to eliminate Iranian drones, their flotilla, and their surface-to-air missiles.

In this context, the isolationism spreading within the Republican camp is a form of admission of powerlessness. The great American political scientist Joseph Nye analysed U.S. power as the ability to rely on force, money, and “smart power.” The first is real when it comes to destruction but powerless to change a regime, as seen in recent examples such as Venezuela and Iran; money is constrained by U.S. indebtedness; and smart power has been weakened by Trump’s policies.

Already under Obama, foreign policy had as its main objective the search for new sources of growth worldwide and support for the international expansion of American companies. Today, Trump, more abruptly, pursues the same objective and shares the same determination to counter Chinese advances. The support given to Trump by major U.S. tech companies, and their stock market outperformance, illustrate this trend.

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