

The Art of Losing War: Operational Control vs Strategic Drift

Nazmul Islam Mahmud¹

THE ART OF LOSING WARS: A Visual Analysis of Strategic Disaster



"The ultimate rule of war is not to destroy targets the fastest... it is the sober practice of limiting military capability to political ends."

Introduction

In those war states, advanced militaries continue to do what they've been doing. That is, defeat the enemy and lose the wars. For more than defense planners, it is the signature disease of great-power warfare in the modern world, and it is important to understand why it occurs, against whom, when,

¹ Nazmul Islam Mahmud is working as a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He is an International Relations graduate from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). His research interest revolves around in the critical and interpretive aspects of the political discourses focusing on state security and sovereignty.

and how. That's important for anyone whose security depends on the viability of their own state's military, and durable political outcomes form the basis.

For 20 years, the United States has occupied Afghanistan, only to see the Taliban reclaim Kabul in as few as weeks of departing Bagram. A year and seven years later, the same scenario happened to a greater extent in Iran.² On February 28th, 2026, Israel and the United States attacked Iran with Operation Epic Fury, which resulted in hundreds of casualties within days, including the death of the leader of the nation of Israel and dozens of senior officers, as well as the decimation of a quarter of the nation's defense forces.³ The campaign continued to annihilate most of Iran's naval forces, down its Air Force, and ruin the country's missile manufacturing site, and ended with numerous unfulfilled cease-fires, a divided NATO, a fresh archetype of strategic exposure in the Gulf data center, and a continuing battleground roundtable over Iran's nuclear negotiations, which are yet to be decided as of this writing.

This article challenges the notion that things like this happen by chance. They are created through three pathologies which feed off each other— i) when civilian leaders do not ask tough questions about “what is a war good for,” they allow Generals to privatise the decision-making and place it in the hands of other politicians; ii) when planners replace political realities with easily counted indicators, the time to act changes to the point that active military operations become too rapid to be effectively monitored by civilian oversight; and iii) most recently, when AI decision systems become more agile than civilian oversight, the judgement for what a war is for is a point that civilian leaders can no longer make. Together, they make up Clausewitz's two-hundred-year-old definition of the source of all strategic disasters—armies are waging wars as if there were a war without policy, nothing more.

Why Powerful Militaries Fail?

For Clausewitz, war is a continuation of political intercourse.⁴ Battles are the grammar of war, not its meaning. A nation may win every fight it fights and yet never win the war in which it is engaged in any way that is conducive to the peaceful resolution of the original conflict that caused the war.

² BBC, “US Left Bagram Airbase at Night with No Notice, Afghan Commander Says,” July 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57682290>; BBC, “US Left Bagram Airbase at Night with No Notice, Afghan Commander Says.”

³ The Center for Preventive Action, “Iran's War With Israel and the United States,” Global Conflict Tracker, June 22, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran>.

⁴ Hugh Smith, “Clausewitz's Definition of War and Its Limits,” *Infinity Journal*, ahead of print, January 12, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.64148/msm.article.943>.

In this case, a successful battle with a negative political outcome— even in some instances a battle that generates new tensions by destroying the peace equilibrium it sought to disrupt, but without creating anything to replace it. Clausewitz explains that there are three forces at work which, when played in real war, propel this growth: popular passion, the force of chance, the force of the people's lives, and the rational force of policy.⁵ An enemy's ability to continue to defend is rarely its army; it's better defined as its "center of gravity," what it is that it really has to defend. Far more commonly a people's allegiance, the unity of an alliance, or a government's stubbornness and determination to keep on fighting. People feel good and useful to get rid of an enemy's forces, especially when they're doing it in an efficient fashion; it is often simply putting the effort into solving the wrong problem. The naval strategist Julian Corbett said much the same thing about 'big battles at sea'—a naval victory is empty if it doesn't lead to a 'land battle victory' and 'big battle fixation' is the term for the tendency among naval professionals to view one stunning battle as a strategy, and not just one step on the way to a different strategy – the 'land battle victory'.⁶ Numbers must justify budgets, as well as advance progress, in bureaucracies, and this means they must collect those that can be grouped and estimate away those that cannot be: the things you can't count that don't matter are treated as if they don't exist — local political legitimacy, patience of a population, trust in an alliance. This pattern is based on the Pentagon of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, but it actually has its origins before him, and appears in each of the others below. In conventional wars, it does only limited damage as there are a lot of things that decide victory and that are countable. Political and irregular wars it is near deathly, as the things that make the difference happen to be the ones that cannot be counted.

When a civilian puts his questions to rest. Samuel Huntington's notable theory of civil/military relations urges a distinction between politics and war as worlds apart and advocates that political agendas be established and then handed over to the professional officers who are the experts in wartime.⁷ Outlining some of the problems of such a "clean separation" with Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion as models, the historian Eliot Cohen concludes that this separation is

⁵ George Dimitriu, "Clausewitz and the Politics of War: A Contemporary Theory," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 5 (2020): 645–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2018.1529567>.

⁶ The 2013 Chief of Army History Conference, "Armies and Naval Strategy," 2013.

⁷ Dayne E. Nix, "American Civil-Military Relations: Samuel P. Huntington and the Political Dimensions of Military Professionalism," 2012.

the problem—War is not a technical operation to be delegated.⁸ Cohen’s alternative is the “Unequal Dialogue,” in which his political leaders and commanders have nothing but candid and unflagging conversations for the duration of the war, and which inevitably comes, at its end, to an abiding resolution in the hands of the civilians.⁹ If that language breaks down, militaries end up doing what they know and what they are trained for, and civilian leaders become enablers who approve actions with no interest in determining if these actions are still accomplishing any political purpose.

Spotting a target and striking it doesn’t happen in just a few days or weeks. In fact, the Pentagon is developing the Joint All-Domain Command and Control program, and NATO has an identical digital program that places a premium on speed — the time it takes from identifying a target to being able to execute the strike, known as decision advantage.¹⁰ The benefits in terms of operations are very real: artillery units are now as efficient as some of the most efficient American units in recent history — and they have fewer soldiers.¹¹ The risk that a strategic plan will make is on the other side. Many of them are “black boxes” that draw their conclusions from which even the government officials operating them can only assume, and which have a weight that an indisciplined, overstressed, and time-constrained civilian government could not counter. This is the metrics miracle: A metric replaces political judgment, and an AI-driven targeting replaces algorithmic judgment, and that could neither be any more controversial nor minimize the gap for political judgment.

⁸ John Baylis et al., *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=sfhgEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=info:L6ULEjhP8rYJ:scholar.google.com&ots=yinnv5U9bZu&sig=uWXHslwcMtcq5wFr6CgOf7F7ybQ>.

⁹ Donald B. Connelly, “The Unequal Professional Dialogue: American Civil-Military Relations and the Professional Military Ethic,” 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235080409_The_Unequal_Professional_Dialogue_American_Civil-Military_Relations_and_the_Professional_Military_Ethic.

¹⁰ Martin Chomsky, *U.S. Department of War Launches Agent Network AI Project to Support Faster Battle Management, Decision Support and Targeting Options*, Important, June 25, 2026, <https://defence-industry.eu/u-s-department-of-war-launches-agent-network-ai-project-to-support-faster-battle-management-decision-support-and-targeting-options/>.

¹¹ GSSR, “Death from Above? The United States Must Address Air Defense Challenges,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, October 19, 2017, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2017/10/18/death-from-above-the-united-states-must-address-air-defense-challenges/>.

Case Studies

Cannae (216 BCE)

Hannibal's expedition to Italy is the classic example in military history of commanding a good military campaign at the tactical level and failing at the strategic level.¹² After a couple of prior Roman defeats at the Trebia and Lake Trasimene, Hannibal set his line of strength in the center, pushing the Roman army into the open, so that his left and right wings could encircle them and destroy a Roman army with over eighty thousand men. Hannibal's cavalry commander urged him to march on Rome before Hannibal could learn how. His cavalier commander, Maharbal, is said to have counselled Hannibal to make a quick march on Rome, fearing that he would be able to win a battle but not use a victory. Hannibal never went to war. He had no means of turning on the Romans' backs and no way to bring about the capitulation of a town he had already pillaged and sacked; the real strength of Rome lay in the fidelity of its Italian allies, who sustained the army, and these shrewdly withheld their consent from negotiation, even after the collapse.¹³

Fabius Maximus would spare Hannibal pitched battles and instead paced his way around and disrupted Hannibal's supply lines as he sought to secure the unity of the Italian alliance—rather than tempting Hannibal to come out and fight for the sake of a war.¹⁴ Hannibal remained in Italy for another twelve years and continued to win wars, but was steadily losing the war.

Vietnam

In Vietnam, Robert McNamara approached the war through the prism of an optimisation problem. An enemy that has no fixed base of operations fights back on an unconventional battlefield, against conventional weapons, which, based on the model of McNamara and Westmoreland, have taken the number of deaths as the final measure of success.¹⁵ It was hardly in touch with the political reality on the ground. Units under body-count quotas, which were used to boost kill ratings, counted civilian dead as combatants and lost their soldiers' intellectual loyalty—a rural

¹² Britannica, "Battle of Cannae | Map, Casualties, Location, Summary, & Tactics | Britannica," June 20, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Cannae>.

¹³ Dexter Hoyos, *Hannibal : Rome's Greatest Enemy*, 2022, 1–100.

¹⁴ Nathan Stewart Rosenstein, *Rome at War: Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Askinfo.blog, "McNamara & Vietnam: How Data Metrics Shaped the War [Analysis]," Askinfo.Blog, June 10, 2026, <https://askinfo.blog/mcnamara-contribution-vietnam-conflict-impact>.

constituency whose consent and co-operation the war was truly about. While only about 12,000 villages were evaluated monthly by the Hamlet Evaluation System, over 90,000 pages of data were compiled, and 67% of South Vietnam was classified as “secure” by 1968.¹⁶ That same year, the North was supposed to be under control, and the South would’ve been too secluded to have any signs of armed resistance.¹⁷ The Tet Offensive was launched to demonstrate that they were measuring – administration, not insurgency. The fact that the measures and years of progress did not catch the enemy before they hit scores of cities resulted in more southern support for the war getting lost than anything that actually happened on the field. In fact broke domestic support for the war, more than anything that record of progress had indicated, and within ten weeks, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election.

Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Within a few weeks of the invasion, the Taliban regime was brought to an end, accomplishing a swift and complete knockout so rapid that it is unsurpassed in history. The switching between administrations, shoved from one regime to the next, battling terrorists, working to establish a viable state, lacking any of them making a momentous, extensive, and honest audit to determine if they were on the right course about both resources and politics on the ground.¹⁸ In turn, each of them reluctantly handed over the responsibility of deciding on that to the generals, and contented themselves with periodic changes of officers. Instead, training programmes that too often solely succeeded in training a military force to carry out the kind of action desired in one single dimension; targeted raids which frequently worked well on a military level, in isolation, on a political layer which was always precarious, but often corrupt and certainly not tested by years of stress. Then in 2021, as the end arrived, the rate of the collapse – the government of Kabul folding in days or the airport clearing chaotic in the evacuation – wasn’t a defect in how it’s carried out.¹⁹

¹⁶ Moritz J. Feichtinger, “Computing Counterinsurgency: The Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) and Databasing During the Vietnam War,” *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 44, no. 4 (2022): 28–43, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2022.3212935>.

¹⁷ Feichtinger, “Computing Counterinsurgency.”

¹⁸ M. C. Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Why the Afghan National Security Forces Will Not Hold, and the Implications for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan*, June 1, 2015, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/tr/ADA617803/>.

¹⁹ “The Collapse of Afghanistan,” *Journal of Democracy*, n.d., accessed June 30, 2026, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-collapse-of-afghanistan/>.

It had been the culmination of an unmistakable trend or seismic shift occurring over the past years, only to erupt suddenly and harshly.

Operation Epic Fury

Algorithmic pathology was used in conjunction with the more traditional algorithms for the first time. Applied with hardly any limitations on the Pentagon's record of killing and damaging, the opening attacks on Feb. 28, 2026, claimed the lives of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior military officials within a few hours, and ultimately singled out more than five thousand targets, decimated the Iranian Navy and Air Force, and shattered roughly eighty-five percent of the nation's defense industrial complex.²⁰

Both of the other dimensions went in the opposite direction. Iran blockaded the Strait of Hormuz within hours, slamming about a fifth of the trade in seaborne oil and gas. In just 72 hours, Iranian drones damaged commercial data centers hosting Amazon Web Services in the UAE and Bahrain, the first purposely targeted instance of cloud infrastructure to see warfare for the first time, and Iran released a list of technology companies to be targeted by its attacks, including some of America's top AI firms that power the economies of the Gulf.²¹ At the time, it was reported that commercial AI was also being utilised for intelligence analysis and to aid the campaign, turning the 'algorithm problem' into a real and identifiable 'face off'—identified within days by an adversary. The strikes had been initiated without the approval of NATO, and the alliance, in open disagreement, had no idea of what European involvement had been — France, Spain & Germany refused to get directly involved, and the other three countries (Japan, South Korea, Australia) were unable even to join.

About \$29 billion for directly acquired equipment from the Pentagon, much of it being the sum of the prices of forty-two American warplanes lost or damaged.²² A ceasefire that was arranged by Pakistan was broken within a few hours in April. It was not until June 15—three months after the

²⁰ The Center for Preventive Action, "Iran's War With Israel and the United States."

²¹ "Amazon Says Drones Damaged Three Facilities in UAE and Bahrain," March 3, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgk28nj0lrjo>.

²² "42 Aircraft, over \$29 Billion: What the Iran War Cost the US Military," *The Times of India*, May 21, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/defence/42-aircraft-over-29-billion-what-trumps-iran-operation-cost-the-us-military/articleshow/131223225.cms>.

war—that the United States and Iran signed an agreement that extended the ceasefire and reopened Hormuz without taking up any actual discussion of whether Iran was developing nuclear arms, let alone when it would happen, since all that remains to be done is a new set of talks.²³

Analysis

Four cases in over two thousand years of development result in the same architecture, with the case of failure shifting. Failure at Cannae is conceptual. There was no theory among the Carthaginian side that destruction at the battle would lead to the surrender of Rome, and one of the reasons for Rome’s eventual recovery was that it ceased to pay Hannibal to fight higher battles to win and turned to the alliance system and the political will needed to keep the war going. In Vietnam, the collapse of the failure was metrical, an elaborate, massive measurement system withered away before everyone could even get used to it. Afghanistan’s failure spiralled over the course of four administrations—each administration justified its lack of an honest audit as good enough instead of sounding alarm bells. All these failures manifested themselves simultaneously in Iran in 2026, a time frame too short for the previous instances to consider.

Vietnam and Afghanistan were the places where false confidence was formed, where it was in the form of a filing cabinet. For the Iran case, it was a building with a street address that an enemy located in just three days. The old measurements created only an intellectual susceptibility— a false sense of security due to measuring the wrong things. The analogue one is called the algorithmic one, and this is then accessed and overlaid by a physical one—the systems that provide that level of confidence can now be bombed, which gives an adversary who can’t match the strength of a state a powerful incentive to go for the infrastructure that strength relies on.

That’s important because the next generation of American and allied military investments, the same systems that are targeted by the decision advantage are designed for a bigger game with China over the Indo Pacific. And this failure is designed to meet the demands of war planners, but is poorly focused on the more slurry political activity in which its force is actually applied. Given that it’s easy to see why the next generation of these systems will not be an exception, Iran has a clear example of this in its recent specific targeting. While it was bad enough to make the point all but moot with respect to political disagreement, it was also enough to create a new target to pounce on.

²³ Alayna Treene Salem Kevin Liptak, Mostafa, “US Releases Official Agreement with Iran. Read the 14-Point Text,” CNN, June 17, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/06/17/middleeast/us-iran-war-mou-text-intl>.

Conclusion

The lesson in this history is not that the weak armies cause the great powers to fall – the armies in these instances were, in most cases, excellent. Great powers go under when they equate military capability with political competence, and create institutions that ensure this quality will not require anyone to be conscious of and correct. The ultimate rule of war is not to destroy targets the fastest. It is the sober practice of limiting military capability to political ends and of making these ends and means change with time, sometimes in ways they could not have foreseen while learning from models. That is never the natural way that military excellence occurs, and it is a habit that has to be fostered, intentionally and continually, not only when a war starts, but on the one question that moves from ‘are we winning?’ to ‘winning towards what?’.