

INDIA'S INDIGENOUS DRONE POWER SURGE

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AMIT GUPTA explains why President Donald Trump can't Do Boots on the Ground in Iran

It is very clear that to get a convincing victory in the Iran war, Donald J. Trump will have to put boots on the ground—in large numbers. Critics have pointed out the obvious problems with this: Iran's mountainous terrain makes a land invasion difficult; it is a country of 90 million people; and the Iranians have been planning for this contingency ever since George Walker Bush labelled them as part of the Axis of Evil. But there is another problem. America has neither sufficient ground troops nor the willingness to take sufficient casualties in such a bloody battle.

What led to this dilemma, and what are its military consequences?

Background

Wars are part of defining America's national identity. From the American War of Independence to World War II, military conflict has shaped the way America views itself. To this day, the American Civil War has a profound impact on the identity of the American South (Southern States), and those who fought in World War II are referred to as the greatest generation. Yet participating in these wars has not always been the noble exercise that American popular culture makes it out to be.

In the US Civil War, you could pay someone to take your place in the conflict, and many took advantage of this option. Yet, despite such measures, over 650,000 Americans died in the conflict.

The US was a late entrant into World War I and never fully mobilised the country's available manpower. After the war, the US Army was rapidly demobilised, and force levels were deliberately kept low.

World War II was different in that there was universal outrage in America about Japan's preemptive attack on Pearl Harbour, and the nation went to war as

people willingly conscripted themselves into the military. 407,000 Americans died in the war, but this, of course, pales in comparison with the estimated 27 million that the Soviet Union lost in the war. Korea followed mere five years after World War II, and cracks were beginning to show in American society over the prospect of sending troops abroad. The public was tired of wars, and there was pressure on the US government to end the war, especially since it had become a military stalemate. Even then, America paid the price with over 36,000 dead in the war.

What really changed America's acceptance of casualties, however, was the Vietnam War, which was the first military conflict to be televised. The media brought back to the United States images of pain and suffering from the

existential wars to defend the homeland and expeditionary wars in faraway countries with unclear political

objectives. While people were willing to fight for the nation's existence (as in World War II), they were not enthusiastic about going to a distant country like Vietnam to fight for obscure political objectives. This was especially the case, given that the United States was experiencing significant internal turmoil due to the civil rights movement.

As the boxer Mohammed Ali famously put it, which was the best expression of the sentiments of a generation, "No Vietcong ever called me N---r!", thus pointing out the inequities of American society. Ali famously refused to serve in the military, as did thousands of others who became draft dodgers by running to

Canada, England, Mexico, and Sweden.

Post-Vietnam

After Vietnam, the US military gradually developed a military doctrine based on three platforms. First, conscription would end, and the US military would be an all-volunteer force. An all-volunteer force would not have the problems the draft created, such as reluctant soldiers who lacked the will and discipline to be effective warriors.

Secondly, as weapons became available, the military increasingly favoured high-tech, precision weaponry. The effectiveness of this weaponry was going to substitute for boots on the

ground in any future war.

Thirdly, given the sensitivities of the American public, which was horrified by seeing body bags return from Vietnam, future wars were going to be low-casualty conflicts.

These three fundamentals of the new force had both advantages and limitations. An all-volunteer force meant that an anti-war movement of the type that emerged as a response to the Vietnam War would no longer be a problem. High technology allowed air power to substitute for casualty-intensive land conflict, and low death tolls meant support for a future war, at least initially, would be widespread in the American

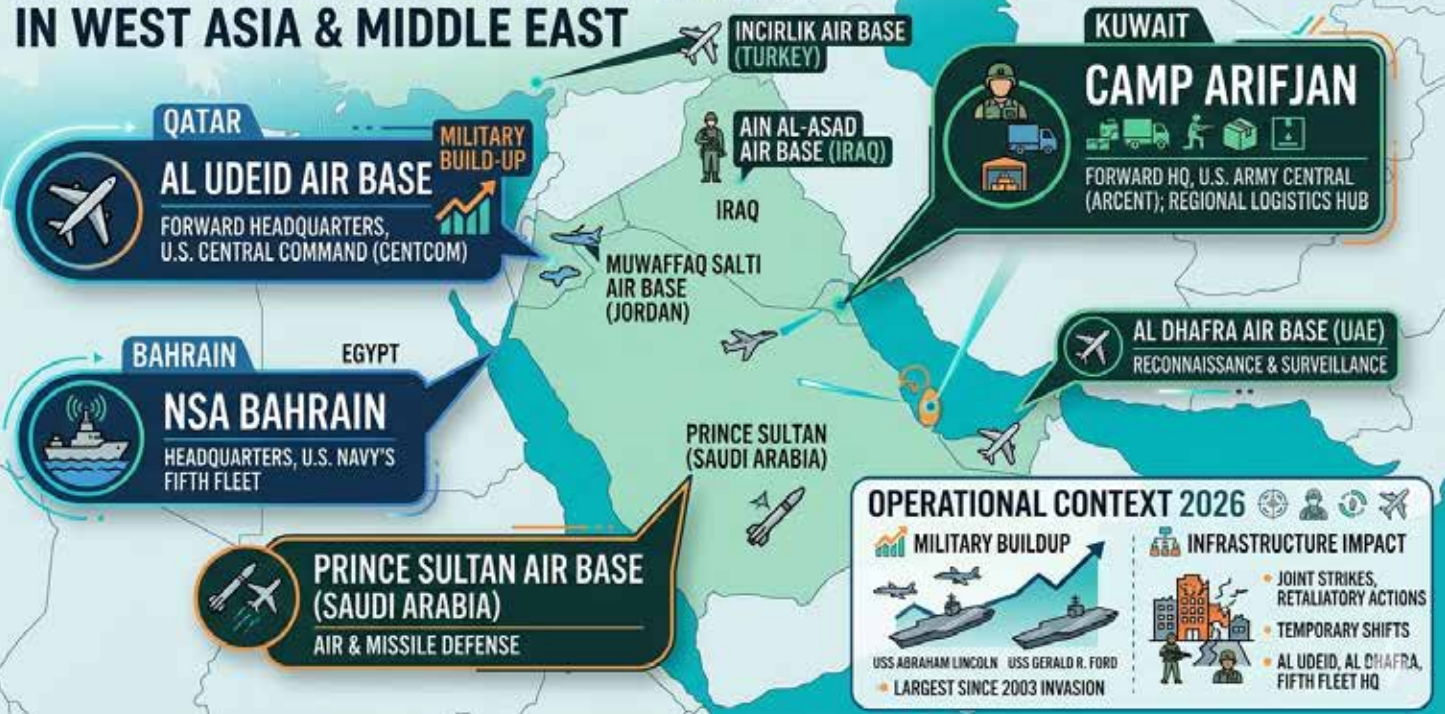
This trend perfectly reinforced the American public's aversion to casualties since it meant that the military could be used without putting boots on the ground and suffering the horrific losses of Vietnam.

Vietnam War, as well as video of body bags of dead soldiers being returned from the front, into the drawing rooms of middle-class America. In fact, over 58,000 American servicemen were killed in the conflict. Further, it was not clear what the rationale for going to war was.

By the time of Vietnam, Americans were starting to differentiate between



UNITED STATES MILITARY BASES IN WEST ASIA & MIDDLE EAST



public. This is what happened in the first Gulf War and the Kosovo conflict.

In the first Gulf War, the US lost 382 soldiers, which was a very low number when compared to the carnage of Vietnam (and in Iraq, the majority were non-combat related deaths). Casualties were even lower in the Bosnia and Kosovo wars, where 12 and 2 Americans were killed, respectively. The American public was getting used to the all-volunteer force winning easily with few casualties, leading the French military commander in Bosnia to say that, "the US believes in zero-dead wars."

And then came the terror attack of 9/11. This was the first attack on US soil since Pearl Harbour, and the American citizenry reacted quite naturally, with thousands seeking to enlist in the military. The Taliban was quickly defeated with a low loss of life, and what followed was that George Bush Junior and the neocons decided to try and change the political map of the Middle East, starting with the regime of Saddam Hussein.

At the time of the second Iraq war, the then chief of the US Army, Eric John Shinseki, asked for several hundred

thousand troops to do the job, but he was given only 145,000. Shinseki's estimate was correct, as the number given was too small to occupy and pacify Iraq. Instead, the US faced a brutal insurgency, which led to over 4000 American deaths and tens of thousands of walking wounded who snipers, improvised explosive devices, and suicide bombers hit. What followed was a military force with high levels of seriously wounded and those

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with post-traumatic stress disorder. The fact is that the combined death

toll of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, after 20 years of conflict, was 8492. This meant about 400 casualties a year, which any modern military would have found to be acceptable. But as the casualty numbers rose, the Bush Junior regime became increasingly unpopular, and it was one of the reasons that Obama got elected, since, unlike Hillary Clinton, he could claim that he had opposed the war.

Since then, the mood in America has been not to get engaged in another brutal land war, and there is extreme sensitivity to the issue of casualties. This is especially the case since, despite being an all-volunteer force, recruitment to the US military still comes largely from the economically disadvantaged parts of its society. The unwillingness to take casualties is reflected in the fact that, compared to the Korean War (where the US lost 36,000 troops) and Vietnam (where there were over 58,000 deaths), there were far fewer deaths in the wars of the new millennium.

As a consequence, one reason Trump was elected again was his pledge not to engage in another major war. This pledge resonated well with the American working class, which, as J.D. Vance has

written in his autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy*, felt it had been used as cannon fodder by George Walker Bush and Barack Obama.

Given this aversion to casualties, what are the implications for American military doctrine and Trump's use of military force?

Low Casualties and Doctrine

The need to minimise casualties has led to an overreliance on high technology to deliver the goods. As America's ability to develop standoff precision-guided munitions (PGMs) grew, it changed its military doctrine and tactics, enabling the US military to strike targets from greater distances with increased accuracy. Thus, a target could be destroyed in one or two strikes, rather than the repeated strikes required in the pre-PGM era. This led to a growing dependence on air and naval power rather than on land forces. This led to the mistaken notion, both in the US and in NATO, that high technology could substitute for ground soldiers.

This trend perfectly reinforced the American public's aversion to casualties since it meant that the military could be used without putting boots on the ground and suffering the horrific losses of Vietnam. Even then, the numbers in Iraq were too high for the American public to tolerate, and the Republicans lost the 2006 Congressional majority because of the rising American death toll in the Iraqi counterinsurgency.

What this has meant is that the margin of error for any American President, in terms of how many military deaths are acceptable, continues to shrink. As noted above, 8492 deaths over twenty years should have been acceptable to the US military and American public, but they saw it as far too high a death toll. This makes war-fighting difficult. After all, despite all the talk of high-tech warfare, wars are won by the use of land forces and often with high death tolls.

This is certainly the case in the Russia-Ukraine war, where both sides have lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers in what has been a return to traditional land warfare. Western analysts have looked at the war with horror since it has brought home what a future war against a determined enemy would look like. And the problem is that unless it is an existential war where the survival of the United States is threatened, the American public will likely be unwilling to allow even a moderately high casualty

rate. Because of this casualty-averse approach, Trump is finding it difficult to develop a coherent military strategy to compel Tehran to follow American diktats.

Iran and the Nuclear Option

Ideally, Trump would have liked to follow up the air strikes on Iran with a land invasion, but that will most probably be unfeasible given the military realities and American public sentiment.

Militarily, the United States would have to use close to 200,000 to launch a land invasion and be willing to suffer significant casualties. Neither are the numbers available nor, given America's war weariness after twenty years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, is there an appetite for another long, drawn-out land campaign. Not surprisingly, polls show that the majority of Americans do not approve of the Iran war and would prefer not to put boots on the ground.

Also, America's success with high-tech wars was against weak enemies like Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Venezuela. Iran is a very different opponent. It has a large population, difficult terrain, the ability to block the Strait of Hormuz, and most

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importantly, a population with the will to fight. Unlike Venezuela, the Iranians have rallied behind their regime despite the supposed opportunity to overthrow the government, which was provided by the assassination of the Supreme Leader. Washington, therefore, has had to reconsider its strategy in the face of a determined opponent.

Faced by these limitations, the Trump Administration has been forced to use air and naval power, which, while certainly damaging Iran, has not been able to deliver the decisive victory that a land invasion would have provided.

Further, the Iranians, who have prepared for over twenty years for this war, have been able to inflict significant damage on US bases in the region by hitting radar installations and destroying one E-3 Sentry aircraft that is vital for the USAF's air superiority. Trump would like to use ground forces, but the fact is that, politically, this would be an extremely risky step to take since the American public would revolt if large numbers of troops were deployed.

This has led to Trump talking about using nuclear weapons, but according to one source, the US military has essentially vetoed the use of these systems. This has created a serious dilemma for the Trump Administration. Prosecuting the war with the old Pentagon playbook is not yielding results, since the Iranians have used geographic advantages and American reticence to wage a full-scale conflict to resist US military pressure.

The unwillingness to take casualties, therefore, has several implications. First, if the war remains a stalemate, the United States has few credible options. The best one, a land invasion, has been taken off the table because of a low public tolerance for war deaths. Reports that Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth would like to reintroduce conscription have been met with widespread public disapproval, and Republican congressmen are unlikely to lose their seats by supporting this measure. Instead, Congress is likely to vote down such an effort to draft young American men and women.

Secondly, the nuclear option is a non-starter. The American public itself is not in favour of using nuclear weapons since Iran is not perceived as an existential threat, whatever the administration and Fox News may claim.

So the Trump Administration will have to seek a diplomatic solution, but this is complicated by Israeli intransigence and an Iranian unwillingness to concede on certain vital issues like the closing down of their ballistic missile programme. Nor is there a seasoned diplomat whom Trump trusts to conduct negotiations with Tehran.

Welcome to the era of modern warfare.

Amit Gupta is an External Fellow with the Forum of Federations, Ottawa, Canada. The views in this article are personal.