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Iran as Vietnam, Ukraine as Korea

Similar Wars End in Similar Ways

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It has taken the Trump administration just two months to race through all five years of the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy: entry, escalation, frustrated stalemate, and negotiations. Now, it's on the Nixon administration's turf: first blustery threats, then gradual realization of the need to extricate via an unsatisfying deal. If this pace holds, the intervention in Iran should be over in another few months, by which point the recriminations will already have begun.

Of course, no historical analogies are perfect, and there are many obvious differences between the conflicts in Iran and Vietnam: different regions, different ideologies at play, a much shorter time frame, no U.S. ground troops or draft, no change in administrations, advanced military technology, and more. Still, there are notable symmetries in the structures of the two conflicts. And the same is true of the war in Ukraine, which has a structure symmetrical to that of the Korean War. And because structures constrain policymakers' choices, recognizing these patterns provides clues to how the wars will end.

The U.S.-Israeli war on Iran is likely to conclude as the Vietnam War did in 1973, with an unstable compromise settlement that addresses some issues but leaves other important ones unresolved. Just as the ultimate fate of South Vietnam was left to be determined later, the

ultimate fate of the Islamic Republic and its nuclear program will be left for another day. In contrast, the war in Ukraine, like the Korean War, will probably end with a settlement that solidifies something like the current line of conflict, with frozen borders patrolled indefinitely in an armistice that proves more stable and durable than most observers expect.

HALF THE WAY WITH LBJ

In November 1963, the leaders of both South Vietnam and the United States were assassinated, putting President Lyndon Johnson suddenly in charge of two countries in crisis. In Vietnam, motivated and well-led northern forces, together with their guerrilla associates in the south, were steadily gaining ground against a hapless South Vietnamese regime. Unless Washington did something to reverse the trend, it seemed Saigon would eventually fall, and the country would be reunified under communist control. Johnson and his team were not greatly optimistic about winning the war, but they feared the domestic and international consequences of losing it. So they decided to increase support for Saigon in hopes that a show of force would cause Hanoi to back off.

At first, this meant sending economic aid and military advisers. Then it meant bombing. Then it meant sending ground troops. And then it meant more of everything. Yet Hanoi stuck to its core objectives and refused to give in. By 1968, the war was costing so much blood and treasure and causing such domestic turmoil that Washington started looking for a way out. Johnson himself never accepted defeat, but he capped the war's escalation, declared a unilateral halt to the bombing, withdrew from political life, and passed the problem on to his successor.

That turned out to be Richard Nixon, who, with his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, inherited a fundamental imperative to finish the war but little political capital for new ventures. Neither Nixon nor

Kissinger ever contemplated simply abandoning Saigon, but they had their sights set on remaking superpower relations and understood the United States had to move on relatively soon—certainly before the next presidential election. At first, they tried to achieve old goals through a new mixture of force and bluff. They hoped that the North Vietnamese could be cowed by savage new bombing and wild threats, the Soviet Union and China could be cajoled into helping, and the American public could be pacified with small troop reductions—and that all this together would produce an agreement allowing American withdrawal, South Vietnamese survival, and North Vietnamese disengagement. This was the period White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman later immortalized in his memoirs:

[Nixon] was certain he could force the North Vietnamese—at long last—into legitimate peace negotiations. The threat was the key, and Nixon coined a phrase for his theory. . . . He said, "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."

But the strategy failed. The Soviets either could not or would not pressure the North Vietnamese strongly enough to make them accept a settlement, the communists neither collapsed nor blinked, and the war dragged on.

By the fall of 1969, the administration was back to where it had begun, except that U.S. troop withdrawals had already started, whetting the American public's desire for more and giving Hanoi an incentive to wait Washington out. Frustration in the White House mounted. Kissinger ordered his staff to prepare plans for a "savage, punishing blow" against the enemy. "I can't believe," he told them, "that a fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking

point." Before attacking, administration officials gave an ultimatum to the Soviets and the North Vietnamese to make concessions—or else. But when they ignored the ultimatum, Washington didn't follow through on its threats.

Eventually, Nixon and Kissinger settled on a second strategy of extrication, combining a gradual U.S. withdrawal, increased aid to the Thieu regime in Saigon, and an intense pursuit of a negotiated settlement. In 1973, this yielded an agreement that allowed the United States to stop fighting and bring home its prisoners of war, without formally betraying an ally. But the fine print of the agreement allowed communist forces to remain in place in the parts of the south they controlled, enabling them to restart operations once the United States withdrew. That stipulation, along with congressional restrictions on renewed U.S. involvement, led to the fall of South Vietnam two years later.

As Johnson had done in Vietnam, President Donald Trump went into Iran to head off worrisome trends. Israeli and U.S. airstrikes in June 2025 had caused major damage to Iran's nuclear program. But afterward, the Islamic Republic started rebuilding its conventional military capabilities, and Israel and the United States feared that this would eventually create a powerful shield behind which Tehran could continue to pursue its nuclear ambitions. Trump bought Israeli assurances that a powerful decapitation strike would topple the Iranian regime and solve the problem once and for all, and he approved a joint attack by American and Israeli forces in late February. The airstrikes destroyed much of Iran's military capacity and killed many Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. But Khamenei's son Mojtaba succeeded his father, and the deeply rooted Iranian regime continued to function. Worse, it struck back against its neighbors in the Gulf and caused a global energy crisis by putting restrictions on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

In April, a frustrated Trump shifted from playing Johnson to playing Nixon, trying a new strategy of increased pressure, ultimatums and threats, and offers to negotiate. This revival of the "madman" approach led to a cease-fire on April 8 and direct talks between American and Iranian officials brokered by Pakistan, but it didn't produce the desired concessions. The Strait of Hormuz remained closed, and the two sides' demands remained far apart. Having never planned for a long war, and with costs mounting and domestic support plummeting, Trump is now clearly looking for some face-saving way out, just as Nixon and Kissinger were in the early 1970s. But the Iranians, like the North Vietnamese, are proving stubbornly uncooperative, betting they can win a contest of suffering. What comes next is likely to be an agreement that stops the fighting, allows shipping to resume, and fudges or postpones the resolution of many other points in dispute. Like the fate of South Vietnam, the ultimate fate of the Iranian nuclear program, along with that of the Iranian regime itself, will end up being decided another day.

DRAW POKER

In Ukraine, meanwhile, the North Korean troops fighting alongside Russia must be experiencing déjà vu as they reenact their grandfathers' nightmare, serving as human sacrifices in a stalemated bloodbath. In late June 1950, North Korean forces surged across the 38th parallel in a surprise attack designed to place the entire Korean Peninsula under communist control. Truman administration officials interpreted the move as a major salvo in the increasingly intense Cold War and committed the United States to the defense of South Korea, arranging for UN sponsorship of the effort.

The North Koreans pushed forward during the summer, eventually pinning UN forces into a small area around the southeastern port of Busan. In September, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur's successful amphibious landing at the port of Inchon behind enemy lines reversed

the trend of the war, and soon it was UN troops that were pushing the North Koreans backward.

In October, flush with victory and sensing an unexpected opportunity to unify the peninsula on South Korean terms, U.S. leaders gave MacArthur the freedom to pursue operations well into North Korean territory, which he exploited to the limit and beyond. But as the UN armies moved ever northward, the war switched directions again, with Chinese troops coming to the aid of the North Koreans and forcing the UN forces to beat a hasty retreat south. India and the United Kingdom pressed the United States to begin negotiations, based on a deal that would involve abandoning Taiwan and admitting China to the UN. But the Truman administration refused, gambling for resurrection on the battlefield. And sure enough, under a new ground commander, Matthew Ridgway, UN forces reversed the trend yet again, grinding their way back up the peninsula in early 1951.

All four wars featured disputes not only among opponents but also among partners.

At this point, both sets of belligerents realized that moving beyond a stalemate would be extraordinarily difficult and costly, and they started to consider a negotiated end to the war on the basis of the status quo ante. MacArthur disagreed with this policy choice and deliberately set out to sabotage it, making belligerent public statements and criticizing the administration to Republicans in Congress. In response, President Harry Truman removed MacArthur from overall command in April, replacing him with Ridgway. In June, after UN forces thwarted a massive Chinese offensive, the Soviet UN ambassador suggested in a radio address that both sides agree to an armistice at the 38th parallel, and in July direct cease-fire negotiations began. Contemporary observers expected a settlement in weeks. The first American negotiators were told to pack dress uniforms for a signing ceremony,

and the first Chinese negotiators took only summer clothing. But the negotiations bogged down, and vicious fighting continued for two more years. An armistice was eventually signed in July 1953, along lines close to where the sides were at the start of negotiations.

The similarities between the wars in Korea and Ukraine are striking. The current war in Ukraine began with a surprise attack by Russian forces in late February 2022. Like the North Koreans in 1950, the Russians made dramatic advances in an attempt to reconquer what they considered lost national territory, and once again American and European officials committed themselves to helping the victim of aggression resist. As in Korea, the first year of the war in Ukraine saw major military reversals and operational movements, followed by several years of a high-intensity stalemate along relatively fixed battle lines.

When Trump took office in 2025, he tried to force a settlement, enticing Russia by suggesting it could keep its territorial gains and bullying Ukraine by withholding support. But neither side was willing to accept a deal, and the fighting continued. The more exhausted and resigned the belligerents become, however, the more the possibility of a settlement ratifying the stalemate increases. Like the Korean War, the war in Ukraine has been extraordinarily violent, with total combat deaths in the hundreds of thousands and casualties in the millions. (In Korea, there were also millions of civilian casualties.) Such a massive effort expended for such minimal gains leaves a mark, and in Ukraine as in Korea, once the fighting stops it is unlikely to restart again any time soon—not least because of the vigilance with which the demarcation line will be guarded.

THIS TIME'S NO DIFFERENT

All four wars featured nuclear brinkmanship. The pattern was set in Korea, the first conflict in history in which general nuclear war between the belligerent coalitions was a possibility. Nuclear powers

would threaten to use the bomb, hoping to scare their enemies into concessions, but never actually follow through. The United States didn't use nuclear weapons in Korea or Vietnam, Russia hasn't in Ukraine, and neither the United States nor Israel will use them in Iran, whatever civilization-ending rhetoric they might deploy. Pressures for nuclear proliferation, however, will surely increase. It will be lost on nobody that Ukraine was attacked only after it gave up a nuclear capability and that a nuclear North Korea is safe while nonnuclear Iran lies in ruins.

All four wars also featured disputes not only among opponents but also among partners—which is unsurprising, since large powers and small ones have different interests and responsibilities. Here again the pattern was set in Korea. When the great powers decided they were ready to stop fighting, they brought their junior partners along. After Stalin's death, new Soviet leaders decided to cut their losses and allow an armistice to proceed, while Washington forced Seoul to accept an agreement it opposed. Twenty years later, Washington forced Saigon to do the same. Ukraine has resisted such pressure so far, but if Russia ever becomes willing to cut a reasonable deal, the United States and its European allies will find ways to make sure Kyiv accepts it. And the same will hold in Iran: once the Trump administration finds common ground with the Islamic Republic, the United States will overrule Israeli and Gulf desires to hold out for a harder line.

There is much loose talk these days about how Washington's failure to achieve its goals in Iran is a sign of some inexorable broader loss of power. "China Increasingly Views Trump's America as an Empire in Decline," declared a recent *New York Times* headline, and many at home and abroad concur. But the same was said about the debacle in Vietnam—only for the United States to rebound from its loss within a few years and go on to decades of global hegemony. There are no guarantees of another such geopolitical revival, but the creative dynamism of American capitalism and the regenerative capacities of

American democracy have pulled rabbits out of hats for centuries and are unlikely to stop doing so now.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of all this historical rhyming is the repeated, naive, across-the-board wish casting of wartime leaders, who casually assume that military force can easily bring political gains, that the enemy won't respond, and that serious strategic planning is unnecessary. In war as in the market, the most dangerous words might be "this time is different."