

# War and the Principles of the Negotiation Process

by George Friedman - April 13, 2026

All wars end. Sometimes, the end is reached when one side achieves its goals, which can range from a limited victory to the conquest of the enemy nation. When neither nation is able to reach its goals, the war ends in negotiations. The evolution and outcome of those negotiations depend on two things. The first is resources: Which nation is most able to continue the war? The second is popular support: whether an agreement can be reached that is acceptable to the public. The leaders on both sides must know what they need to achieve in order to survive, a question that at times competes with the national interest.

Each side must consider the willingness of its citizens to fight on or to demand an end to the war. This is not unlike the world of business, where the interests of shareholders and the management can at times diverge.

The goal of the United States in initiating the war against Iran was stated as preventing a nuclear Iran. One fear was that a nuclear Iran might threaten the United States. The other was that a nuclear Iran would come to dominate the region, which, given the region's oil wealth and economic importance, would make Iran a superpower. Armed with a nuclear weapon, Iran could coerce its neighbors, build its economic power and translate it into greater military power. So there was a great deal at stake during this war.

At this point, neither side has been able to defeat the other militarily, and both sides must reach a conclusion in which the price of peace is not so great as to threaten the survival of their nations, or of their regimes. This, then, is a moment when geopolitical considerations encounter domestic political considerations. And as in all negotiations, there is a psychological dimension. The nation that appears to need a settlement based on both its military and domestic political reality is the weaker party. Therefore, each nation and its regime must appear fully prepared to continue the war and capable of doing so. The side that seems both more capable and even desirous to wage the war has a huge advantage. Internal threats to the regime's survival undermine this strategy.

Iran's weakness is that in the long run, the United States is inherently more powerful in terms of weapons production and weapons capability. The United States' weakness is the vulnerability of the political leadership and Americans' substantial opposition to continuing the war. Recent polls show a

majority of Americans oppose the war, and a higher percentage oppose sending ground troops into Iran. By contrast, Iran's posture is that it is prepared to carry on the war indefinitely, given the strength of its regime internally. Thus, while Iran is much more vulnerable to the United States in an extended war, the United States is weaker because of its political reality: It is a nation that is not prepared to engage in an extended war. Given the nature of Iran's regime, it seems not to fear or consider the internal mood of the nation. As the war began, President Donald Trump called for an uprising of the Iranian people, based on the recent demonstrations that had taken place against the regime. That this has not happened indicates that the regime has subdued its internal enemies, giving it a somewhat more powerful hand in the negotiations than it would have otherwise had, while the political reality inside the United States makes extended warfare more difficult to wage.

Iranian strategy is to prolong the war, even as the United States degrades Iran's military. The Iranian view is that the longer it can constrain the global oil supply, the more likely resistance to the war will weaken the American government at home. In addition, the longer the war lasts and oil is disrupted, the more other nations will pressure the United States to end the fighting. Iran's view is that a longer war will weaken the United States in several ways, even as the U.S. military advantage over Iran widens. It does not expect the United States to capitulate, but the longer it can drag out the war, the more urgently the American leadership will want to end it, and the more concessions the U.S. will make.

Iran's strength is that it has far more to lose in this war than the United States does, yet paradoxically, the longer the war lasts, the more favorable the end will be for Iran. From the United States' point of view, the longer the war goes on and the higher the military and economic costs, the less leverage it has in negotiations. It is essential that the U.S. be able to increase military pressure on Iran to increase the costs of war on the Iranian public and regime. But an escalation runs counter to Washington's ability to wage the war due to domestic political forces.

The American dilemma in this war is in principle similar to the logic of the Vietnam War. The United States entered that conflict on the assumption that its military force would cripple North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The communists, however, had a far greater interest in winning the war than the United States had. By not losing the war, they defeated the United States by generating over time opposition to the conflict in the United States. The time frame for that was more than a decade, but the communists had interests so profound that they endured, while the U.S. interest was far more limited, leading to American failure to achieve its ends in the war over a very extended time.

To some extent, the U.S. stakes in this war are greater than they were in Vietnam. Certainly, the economic stakes are higher, given the negative short-term economic impact on the United States, American allies and other nations such as China, whose economy is somewhat dependent on oil imports at prewar prices and which is in the process of negotiating mutual accommodation with the United States. The question is whether other nations harmed economically by the war will place pressure on Iran, or on the United States, to end the conflict. Given that the Iranian regime has everything to lose in this war, and that the United States has far less to lose, pressure on the U.S. (domestically and from other nations) will have a much greater effect than pressure on Iran.

The fundamental question is whether internal pressure on the Iranian regime will increase and be more effective in the coming weeks of war. And that is in turn based on whether the U.S. will escalate the war and help create such a result. That depends on whether the Vietnam model of escalation will be more effective in this war – which is at least a very uncertain assumption.

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