

The Decline of American Hard Power? The Iran War and Its Impact on Perceptions of the USA

— Stephen Joyce, Aarhus University (June 18, 2026)

Throughout 2025, the USA's democratic allies wrestled with how to manage the Trump administration. For decades, the world's democracies had worked within a global order defined and led by the United States. For Europe, American defense of the continent through NATO was central to European security; for Asian-Pacific nations such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and especially Taiwan, the USA was a crucial security partner against threats from China or North Korea. This situation led in 2025 to many embarrassing capitulations to Trump's various threats, with the EU agreeing to an unfavorable trade deal in order to retain American military support and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte toe-cringingly referring to Trump as "Daddy," even as Trump cozied up to Putin and attempted to force Ukraine to surrender the Donbas to Russia.

Trump's threat to annex Greenland in January 2026 brought this phase to an end. It became apparent that the USA was as likely to attack its democratic allies as defend them. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a landmark speech at Davos that clarified this new situation for the world's democracies:

Today I will talk about a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality... On the other hand, I would like to tell you that the other countries, especially intermediate powers like Canada, are not powerless. They have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the various states.

The power of the less powerful begins with honesty.

The honesty Carney spoke of was the recognition that, far from being the leader of the free world, the USA may not even be a member of the free world. As I argued in January, the traditional basis of American exceptionalism, that it was a nation uniquely consecrated to democracy, had collapsed both for many in the USA and in the international community.

However, neorealists would argue that soft power considerations such as the attractiveness of American ideals are overrated in geopolitics. According to Ernest J. Wilson III, "neorealist approaches... tend to emphasize hard power, especially the hard power of states, while liberal

institutionalist scholars emphasize soft power as an essential resource of statecraft” (2008, 114). Thus, Samuel Huntington in his influential *The Clash of Civilizations* argued:

Soft power is power only when it rests on a foundation of hard power. Increases in hard economic and military power produce enhanced self-confidence, arrogance, and belief in the superiority of one’s own culture or soft power compared to those of other peoples and greatly increase its attractiveness to other peoples. (1996, 92)

In a neorealist worldview, the USA’s soft power ultimately rests on its position as the world’s foremost superpower. Certainly, the USA has many allies who have no interest in democratic values. For the autocracies of the Middle East, the USA’s importance lay in its role as the world’s dominant military power. No other nation could match the USA’s military budget or sophisticated hi-tech weaponry. Having American bases on one’s territory was a guarantee of security. This seemed as true in the Middle East as it did in Europe or on the Korean peninsula.

The Iran War has changed that calculus. From the start, the USA set itself the unrealistic goal of regime change; once this failed to happen, the war was effectively lost as the US military could not achieve its primary political objective. However, even more damaging than losing a war of choice in a matter of months is how unprepared the US military seems to be for the new era of drone warfare. In an important article entitled “The New Revolution in Military Affairs,” former Ukrainian defense minister Andriy P. Zagorodnyuk explained some of the key changes that drones have wrought. Western militaries “often built doctrines around reduced numbers of highly sophisticated, precise, and expensive weapons. Precision became the decisive attribute, while mass was de-emphasized.” The US military, in particular, used its aerial dominance to deliver precise bombing assaults using hi-tech, high-cost weaponry that no other nation could match. In the drone era, however:

Precision, including over long distances, is no longer expensive and scarce. Technologies that once required state-level resources are now widely accessible through simpler components, open-source software, and short innovation cycles. As a result, precision can be applied at scale and at much lower cost.

Moreover, air superiority is no longer a simple unitary concept because the airspace itself has become more complex:

The air domain is increasingly fragmented into multiple vertical and functional layers. Control in one layer does not guarantee control in others... Large numbers of drones now operate across these layers: high-altitude reconnaissance platforms, medium-altitude long-range strike drones, and dense swarms of low-altitude tactical systems. Each layer presents distinct detection challenges, requiring different sensor types and different countermeasures.

Anyone paying attention to the Russo-Ukrainian War would have known that Iran would respond by launching relatively cheap Shahed drones at American military bases, neighboring countries, and potentially ships in the Persian Gulf. What is shocking is that the US military seemed completely unprepared for this, launching million-dollar Patriot missiles at drones costing only thousands of

dollars. This is a wholly unsustainable cost-exchange ratio. Because these drones are easily produced, there is also no way for the US to shut down the ability of Iran to hit ships in the Persian Gulf. It does not matter if they hit several drone factories or take out dozens of drone teams. In the new era of “affordable precise mass,” it is almost impossible to prevent a determined enemy from launching precise and destructive assaults using cheap and widely available technologies. In this context, hi-tech and hugely expensive American weapons systems can seem like an elephant trying to fight a swarm of mosquitoes.

Once it became apparent that the USA was not prepared for drone warfare, its allies in the Gulf immediately turned to a country that is – Ukraine. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have already signed long-term defense deals with Ukraine, with reported interest from several others. Beyond the immediate crisis, there is concern that the US has run down its supply of expensive hi-tech missiles and would struggle to defend its allies if another war broke out. Even though US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has claimed, with Trumpian hyperbole, that “ultimately our stockpiles are great, and they’re only getting stronger,” European nations continue to deepen the integration of their defense industries with Ukraine as there is belated recognition that Ukraine is now more important for European security than the USA. The Taiwanese government is also attempting to develop a new defense initiative focused on domestically-produced drones that would devastate any potential Chinese invasion fleet, rather than relying solely on American weapons. This is a logical response to the weakness the US military has displayed in Iran; as Phillips O’Brien, Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of St. Andrews has argued, “if the United States finds itself in an extended war with China anytime soon, it is likely to lose.”

The age of American military dominance through air superiority and hugely expensive precision weapons systems, therefore, may be coming to an end, which is causing its allies across the globe to re-evaluate the USA’s importance as a security partner. It still has the world’s most powerful military – but the Iran War has demonstrated that it is no longer so powerful that it can win any fight or defend against every threat. What we are seeing now is a *decentering* of the USA from the strategic thinking of allies around the world. Whereas in the 1990s it could be seen, in the words of then Secretary of State Madeline Albright, as “the indispensable nation,” today its allies from Europe to the Middle East to Asia are increasingly thinking about how to dispense with relying on the USA, a process that is being accelerated by the decline of American hard power.

It is unclear how American culture, which is always alive to the nation’s evolving role in the world, will respond to these developments. Americans traditionally revere the US military, and the American president is often referred to as “the leader of the free world.” In the massive superhero franchise *The Avengers*, it is the US army veteran Captain America who is the acknowledged team leader, and if aliens in a sci-fi movie say to humanity, “Take us to your leader,” it is understood that this means the president of the United States. In many ways, this reflected the actual world order. Some Americans think this order will be restored if Democrats return to power in 2028, but it is already too late for that. As historian Timothy Snyder put it:

The war is exposing a guiding principle of US President Donald Trump's foreign policy: *superpower suicide*. Empires rise and fall, but to my knowledge no state has ever deliberately, and systematically, killed its own power – much less with such speed.

Will American culture be able to integrate such a perspective? Will we soon, as in the “lost illusions” (Cook 2000, xvi) of post-Vietnam and post-Watergate cinema, be seeing a wave of revisionist superhero films, with Gotham weary of an alcoholic Batman bringing more chaos than security, or a declining, schizophrenic Superman exhausting the patience of Metropolis with his erratic behavior? Or will American popular culture continue to produce aggrandized depictions of US military prowess and global dominance that are increasingly disconnected from reality? The more the rest of the world decenters the USA from its strategic thinking, the harder it will become – for Americans no less than for everyone else – to maintain the traditional view of American exceptionalism.

REFERENCES

- Cook, David A. 2000. *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–79*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wilson, Ernest J. III. 2008. “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 110–124. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002716207312618>