

The Campaign Against Iran and the Russian Strategy Toward the Trump Administration

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With the start of the second Trump presidency, a prevailing assumption in Moscow was that, under the leadership of the new American administration, the United States would prioritize understandings and agreements over escalation. It was believed that Washington would avoid the use of military force that could draw it into prolonged, costly, and uncontrollable operations. This assumption shaped Russia's risk assessment and its perception of Washington's conduct. However, the campaigns against Iran in June 2025, and the one that erupted at the end of February 2026, undermined these foundational assumptions. Now that the American pattern of action has deviated from the logic Moscow attributed to it, a re-evaluation of the logic through which American policy was examined and interpreted is required.

With Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025, Moscow viewed the change in the U.S. administration as a strategic opportunity to alleviate the pressure it faced. This came against the backdrop of the isolation and sanctions imposed by Western nations, led by Washington, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Moscow assessed that the new American policy would pivot away from viewing the global arena through a liberal-democratic lens, and would therefore rely less on values, norms, and moral justification. [For the Kremlin, Trump symbolized the end of this paradigm.](#)

In Moscow's estimation, Trump's policy reflected a view of all nations as legitimate actors with diverse interests, even when those interests clashed with Washington's preferences. According to this interpretation, the Trump administration was shifting the use of force from a means of total defeat of the enemy to a rapid, focused instrument intended to improve leverage ahead of negotiations. Russia anticipated that the "America First" policy would lead to a reshaping of American global engagement

based on distinct national interests, while reducing commitments to international institutions and ideological alliances. For Moscow, this shift meant that negotiations over Ukraine were possible, with the United States recognizing that all parties have security interests, and that the American objective would not be Russia's defeat, but rather the resolution of the conflict through compromise.

In retrospect, it appears that Russia's misinterpretation did not stem from an underestimation of American power. Moscow never doubted the military, economic, and technological capabilities of the United States. [The failure lay elsewhere: a misunderstanding of the function of power in Trump's policy.](#) The central question was not whether Washington was capable of using force, but whether it viewed force as leverage for negotiation or as an instrument for shaping an outcome.

Following the events in Venezuela in the weeks leading up to Operation "Epic Fury," a realization [began to take shape in Moscow.](#) The American pattern of action had become more unpredictable and less defined than in the past. The United States was depicted as the world's preeminent military power, capable of projecting force almost anywhere on the globe, with the current administration wielding that power without diplomatic niceties or rhetorical justifications. This perception emphasized Washington's extensive freedom of action and the difficulty in anticipating the boundaries of its operations.

At the same time, the Russian discourse did not yet focus on whether this constituted a paradigm shift. Instead, it centered on how to respond to American policy: what could be positioned against the use of direct force, and which foreign policy model should be adopted to minimize or prevent damage. In other words, even when an increased American willingness to use force was identified, it was still perceived as an intensification of a familiar pattern rather than a profound change in the rules of the game. [One of the significant events](#) in this context was the American participation in Operation "Rising Lion"—the Israeli strike against Iran in June 2025—including attacks on Iranian nuclear sites. Nevertheless, the American strike was initially understood as part of the "America First" policy, intended to improve American position ahead of negotiations rather than to bring about the enemy's total defeat. Furthermore, the fact that the United States acted alongside Israel, rather than leading the entire campaign on its own, reinforced the assumption that this was a limited operation within a logic of risk management, rather than a transition to a model of proactive decisiveness.

In this view, the Trumpist pattern is revealed: [pressure shifts to a deal offer, which is then followed by escalation if the desired outcome is not achieved.](#) In the current confrontation with Iran, this logic is particularly evident: alongside military actions, Washington continues to insist on negotiations while threatening further strikes in the event of an Iranian refusal. However, the very role of negotiations as a regulatory mechanism has been eroded, given the inconsistency in the demands placed on Iran and the continuous intensification of pressure on Tehran.

The Undermining of Russian Conceptions Regarding Trump's Policy

The regional campaign that began on February 28 [completely undermined Russian assessments of the Trump administration.](#) From Russia's perspective, this was an unprecedented American move. An analysis of Russian strategic discourse indicates that the initial shock in Moscow stemmed not only from the intensity of the opening strike but from the collapse of its understanding of American logic. The United States led a joint operation with Israel, involving high risk and significant firepower, against an

actor that did not pose an immediate security threat to the U.S. itself, with the [declared objective at the outset of the operation being "total defeat."](#)

In Moscow, the conclusion drawn from the Iranian case is that within the Trumpist system, war and diplomacy are not contradictory, but rather fused into a single mechanism of coercion. Force is not employed to support negotiations, but rather to dictate their outcome. This marks a fundamental difference from previous phases of American policy: coercion has ceased to be a lever of pressure and has become an instrument for the deliberate reshaping of reality. Within this framework, even economic disputes are liable to escalate rapidly into demonstrations of force, serving as a preliminary stage in a broader cycle of action: first intimidation, followed by an attempt to extract political or strategic concessions.

Russian analysts have shifted their focus from the immediate regional balance of power to American patterns of action and their potential implications for other arenas, most notably Ukraine. The Kremlin is projecting from the Iranian case onto the Ukrainian arena in order to assess how Washington may act toward Russia on core issues. From this, a broader insight is emerging: a return to the familiar pattern of American hegemony seen after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet in a less restrained and more instrumental form. In this sense, the United States is becoming, in the Kremlin's eyes, a "familiar" but more dangerous adversary, operating according to a known strategic logic, yet with a far greater willingness to employ force proactively rather than merely as a reaction.

Furthermore, the American move against [Iran is perceived in Moscow as part of a broader trend](#): the United States no longer wishes to be bound by commitments, alliances, agreements, and institutions. Anything that limits its freedom of action is now viewed as a burden. This understanding is particularly significant because it alters how Moscow interprets future agreements with Washington. If commitments are temporary, and if every arrangement is liable to become an interim stage before further pressure, then diplomacy itself loses its status as a stabilizing mechanism.

The "Epic Fury" Effect: Moscow's Lessons and Implications for the Ukrainian Front

[This sobering realization is being translated in Moscow into a series of operative conclusions regarding its rivalry with the United States.](#) First, there is a growing understanding that the previous assessment, according to which the United States separates economic pressure from military force, was flawed. Economic sanctions are no longer perceived as a distinct instrument, but rather as part of a continuous process of attrition designed to lay the groundwork for the direct or indirect use of force. Consequently, American pressure is not viewed as a transient event expected to end or stabilize, but as a long-term process that could persist for years or even "[decades.](#)"

From this stems a pessimistic conclusion regarding the possibility of reaching stable agreements with Washington on the issue of Ukraine. Moscow increasingly assesses that the United States is not a partner with whom long-term settlements can be established, but rather an actor that operates tactically and is capable of withdrawing from its commitments at any moment. For the Kremlin, Operation "Epic Fury" served as proof that compromises do not necessarily lead to the end of a conflict; instead, they may result in the presentation of new demands and intensified strategic pressure.

The experience in the campaign against Iran also demonstrates that the United States is willing to absorb higher levels of damage than previously assumed, including strikes on American bases in the

Persian Gulf and rising oil prices. This conclusion has direct implications for the Ukrainian arena and for how Moscow assesses the prospects of its settlement. In the view of Russian experts, American attempts to increase pressure regarding Ukraine cannot be ruled out. Trump's desire to reduce involvement in Ukraine does not stem from a closeness to Russia, but from a strategic hierarchy of priorities that places China at the center and views Russia as a key factor whose decoupling from the Beijing axis would weaken the Chinese rival.

Against this backdrop, an understanding is taking shape in Russia that it cannot rely solely on political agreements, but must first and foremost depend on military capabilities. Within this context, recognition is growing that nuclear weapons currently constitute the most effective guarantee against the American use of force. However, there is also a growing understanding in Moscow that the mere existence of a nuclear arsenal is insufficient to ensure stable deterrence. In light of the shift in the American perception of risk, there is an intensifying demand to move from simply possessing capability to establishing its credibility: not only to possess the means, but to constitute a credible military threat. Deterrence is not merely a technical function of capability; it depends on how the other side assesses the threshold for use and the degree of determination to cross it under extreme conditions. The war in Iran, perceived as proof of American willingness to escalate and act beyond previous norms, reinforces the conclusion that Russia must also operate in the cognitive arena to shape perceptions of its resolve.

The Limits of American Power

As the campaign against Iran evolved, Moscow looked favorably upon the Iranian regime's ability to demonstrate resilience in the face of the combined military might of the United States and Israel. The prospect of a "total victory" over Iran grew distant; Washington was forced to contend with severe economic repercussions, including a spike in oil prices, alongside the difficulty of achieving a swift decisive defeat and a widening gap between initial declarations and actual outcomes. For Russia, the central message was clear: the United States is not omnipotent. Its ability to impose its will, both militarily and economically, is significant but finite. The limitation lies not necessarily in the power itself, but in the ability to translate that power into a stable political outcome.

The developments in the later stages of the campaign do not return the Russian interpretation to its starting point, according to which Trump's policy rests primarily on transactional diplomacy. On the contrary, the very fact that Trump set the objective of "[unconditional surrender](#)" at the outset of the campaign [remains a central reference point](#) for understanding American policy, even after that objective was not achieved. In other words, the American failure is not interpreted as proof that Trump never sought decisive victory, but rather that he failed to achieve it. This sharpens an important distinction between intention and outcome: Trump is perceived as an actor operating within a logic of decisive victory, but one who is forced to retreat when strategic costs mount and it becomes clear that Iranian resistance will not be quickly broken.

Russian expert discourse emphasized that the gap between objectives and outcomes stems not only from operational limitations, but also from a lack of clarity in defining the objectives themselves. The multiplicity of goals, including regime change, damage to the nuclear program, military degradation, and regional deterrence, without a clear hierarchy among them, blurs the meaning of "victory" and complicates its realization. In this context, the campaign in Iran serves not only as evidence of the limits

of American power but also as a testament to how the use of force does not necessarily translate into the achievement of political goals.

Looking to the Future

Operation "Epic Fury" signaled for Moscow far more than a regional event or an Iranian tactical failure. It marked the emerging collapse of the vision of a "multipolar world," which has been one of the pillars of Russian strategy in recent decades. This vision rested on the assumption that the era of unilateral American dominance had ended and that Washington was, at most, "first among equals." However, the American decision to launch a proactive campaign in Iran broadcasts to Moscow that American hegemony remains an existing fact and that it now operates according to a logic of decisive victory that leaves little room for bargaining or stable arrangements.

This re-evaluation is crystallizing into a Russian recognition of its structural inferiority against Washington's economic and military superiority, particularly under a Trump administration that demonstrates a high willingness to use force proactively and unpredictably. Consequently, confidence in the stability of political agreements has eroded, now perceived as merely temporary and fragile arrangements. Nevertheless, the gap between Russia's ambitions and its actual capabilities pushes it toward a cautious policy of risk management and damage control.

Thus, Moscow is expected to avoid direct escalation with the United States, preferring instead a decentralized campaign based on activity in secondary arenas and the use of hybrid means. This strategy harnesses influence operations, cyber warfare, energy pressures, and the deployment of proxy forces aimed at eroding American influence below the threshold of war. For Washington, the Russian pattern of action creates a window of opportunity for targeted pressure—precisely at a time when Moscow's room for maneuver is shrinking. Effectively exploiting this opportunity requires the administration to recognize that the confrontation has shifted to indirect and ongoing arenas where decisive victory is difficult to achieve.

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