

# Restoring Deterrence Will Prevent Endless Wars

By Victor Davis Hanson

On January 3, 2020, the Trump administration conducted a drone strike near Baghdad International Airport, killing Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani.

Soleimani had a long record of waging surrogate wars against Americans, especially during the Iraq conflict and its aftermath.



After the Trump cancellation of the Iran Deal, followed by U.S. sanctions, Soleimani reportedly stepped up violence against regional American bases—most of which Trump himself ironically wished to remove.

A few days later, Iran staged a performance-art retaliatory strike against Americans in Iraq and Syria, assuming Trump had no desire for a wider Middle East war.

So, Iran launched 12 missiles that hit two U.S. airbases in Iraq. Supposedly, Tehran had warned the Trump administration of the impending attacks that killed no Americans. Later reports, however, suggested that some Americans suffered concussions, while more damage was done to the bases than was

initially disclosed.

Nonetheless, this Iranian interlude seemed to reflect Trump's agenda of avoiding "endless wars" in the Middle East while restoring deterrence that prevented, not prompted, full-scale conflicts.

Yet in a second Trump administration, rethreading the deterrence needle without getting into major wars may become far more challenging. The world of today is far more dangerous than when Trump left in 2021.

An inept Biden administration has utterly destroyed U.S. deterrence abroad through both actual and symbolic disasters: the Chinese dressing down of U.S. diplomats in Anchorage; the humiliating skedaddle from Afghanistan; the brazen flight of a Chinese spy balloon across the U.S.; the invasion of Ukraine by Russia; the October 7, 2023 massacre of 1200 Israelis; the serial Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea; the visible restraint of Israeli from fully replying to Iranian missile attacks on its homeland; and renewed bellicosity on the part of both North Korea and China toward American allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Of course, a second-term Trump must radically reform the Pentagon and beef up the military while warning enemies of the consequences to follow from any unwise aggression.

But if opponents believe such admonitions remain only vocal threats, then empty verbiage surely will erode deterrence further—such as Joe Biden's serial and empty braggadocio, "Don't!"

Biden's past theatrical finger-shaking translated into aggressors like Putin going into Ukraine, Iran sending missiles into Israel, and the Houthis serially hitting shipping in the Red Sea.

Given the past messes of the Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian interventions, and the catastrophic Biden humiliation in Afghanistan, Trump in 2024 is much more emphatic about the need to avoid such overseas dead-end entanglements or even the gratuitous use of force that historically can sometimes lead

to tit-for-tat entanglements.

Still, Trump's selection of J.D. Vance as vice president, along with Tulsi Gabbard, RFK, Jr., and Tucker Carlson as close advisors, coupled with the announcements that former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and prior UN Ambassador Nikki Haley will not be in the administration, may be misinterpreted by scheming foreign adversaries as proof of Trump neo-isolationism.

Moreover, the U.S. is battered by an unsustainable \$37 trillion national debt and a nonexistent southern border that saw 12 million illegal aliens enter with impunity.

So, the use of force abroad is now often seen in a zero-sum fashion as coming at the expense of unaddressed American needs at home.

Moreover, a woke, manpower-short military has not achieved strategic advantages from wars abroad, while disparaging and alienating the very working-class recruits who disproportionately fight and die in them.

Recently, even as President-elect Trump's inner circle emphasized an end to endless conflicts, Trump warned Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin not to escalate his attacks against Ukraine. Yet that advice was followed by a Russian massive drone onslaught against civilian Ukrainian targets.

Putin no doubt wishes to encourage American enemies to test Trump's deterrent rhetoric against his campaign's domestic promises to mind America's own business at home.

Is there a way to square the deterrence circle?

Trump will have to speak clearly and softly while carrying a club. And for the first few months of his administration, he will be tested as never before to make it clear to Iran and its terrorist surrogates, China, North Korea, and Russia that aggression against US interests will be swiftly and quietly met with disproportionate and overwhelming repercussions.

Yet Trump will likely have to rely on drones, missiles, and

air strikes and not on major engagements, to deter enemies from aggression—and his domestic critics from claiming he turned into a globalist interventionist.

He is not.

Trump remains a Jacksonian. But such deterrence entails warning from time to time the reckless and adventurous abroad that our allies have no better friend than America and our adversaries no worse enemy.

In other words, Trump must remind Americans only by periodically deterring enemies can he prevent endless wars.

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