

Strategic Considerations on the Western Wars in Ukraine, Iran and Lebanon

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Abstract

This article argues that the United States and its Western allies are pursuing a strategy of denial in the wars in Ukraine, Iran and Lebanon. The aim of this strategy is not to end these wars through diplomacy but to deny Russia and Iran victory and closure: to prevent them from translating tactical battlefield victories into strategic victory, and to keep the conflicts open through calibrated phases of intensity, escalation, attrition and open-endedness. Diplomacy, whose historic function is to settle and terminate wars, has been converted into the principal instrument of denial itself: used to interrupt or pause combat, only for agreements to be broken and the war escalated across the entire battlespace. The article addresses two questions: what is the U.S.-NATO desired strategic outcome in its four war theatres, and what is Russia doing wrong that Iran is doing right? Drawing on the doctrinal writings of Elbridge COLBY, the war-termination literature, the scholarship on frozen conflicts, the classical Greek concept of stasis, non-Western strategic traditions and the analytical commentary of John HELMER, the article develops two concepts: strategic-closure denial — the prevention of an adversary from converting battlefield advantage into an enforceable political settlement — and punctuated conflict stasis, the condition denial seeks to produce: a war neither ended nor allowed to end, whose ulterior objective goes beyond freezing the conflict to dividing and fracturing the adversary's regime and political community. It contrasts the Ukrainian theatre, where Russia has confined itself largely to symmetrical battlefield attrition, with the Iranian theatre, where Iran imposes visible costs on its adversaries in blood (casualties and body bags), prices (inflation, consumer pockets and insurance costs) and asset values (share prices). It concludes, first, that unless Russia learns from Iran and imposes such costs on those sustaining the war, it will not achieve its strategic war aims; second, that Iran, by visibly raising the costs of war for the United States, has the better prospect of imposing its will despite the U.S. strategy of victory-denial; and third, that denial without a theory of termination risks producing wars that neither side can end on acceptable terms.

1. Introduction

Western policy towards Russia is designed to weaken it economically, militarily, institutionally and diplomatically. The strategic objective is to engineer, over time, a pro-Western regime in a weakened and fragmented Russia that would grant the West privileged and profitable access to its generous supply of mineral resources, whilst geo-strategically prising Russia away from China.

This policy explains an otherwise puzzling feature of contemporary Western statecraft: the downgrading of diplomacy, or its use as a ruse. The West is not, on this reading, interested in ending the four wars in which it is engaged — Palestine, Lebanon, Iran and Ukraine. Diplomacy is used to settle and end wars; denial wants to keep the wars going through phases of intensity, escalation, attrition and open-endedness.

Two related questions organise the argument that follows:

- What is the U.S.-NATO desired strategic outcome in all four of its war theatres?
- What is Russia doing wrong that Iran is doing right?

The answer to the first question is that the U.S.-NATO is pursuing a particular variant of the strategy of denial: the denial of victory and of closure. It seeks to block and prevent its adversaries from translating tactical battlefield victories into strategic victory — and it does so, above all, by converting diplomacy, traditionally the instrument used to close and end wars, into its main instrument of denial. This is critical to understanding why the U.S.-NATO is not pursuing real diplomacy, but merely using it to interrupt or pause combat on the battlefield, only to break diplomatic agreements and escalate across the entire battlespace. It is equally critical to answering the second question, to which the analysis of John HELMER, examined below, is addressed.

Operationally, the U.S.-NATO is trying to achieve two outcomes:

- **Punctuated conflict stasis:** the maintenance of its wars in suspended animation — neither ended by settlement nor allowed to reach decision — through calibrated punctuations of escalation, attrition and pause. As Section 4 argues, this goes beyond 'freezing the conflict' as generally understood: its ulterior objective is to induce stasis, in the classical Greek

sense, within the adversary — dividing and fracturing the opposing regime and political community.

- **Preventing regional hegemonic alliances from emerging:** acting, in COLBY's vocabulary, as the external cornerstone balancer that stops any aspiring hegemon — and any agglomeration of Russia, Iran and China — from consolidating a favourable regional balance of power.

This article focuses on Ukraine and Iran. It proceeds in seven steps: it reconstructs the doctrine of denial from its principal contemporary author; it grounds the argument in the scholarly literature on war termination; it develops the concepts of stasis, frozen conflict and punctuated conflict stasis; it examines the Ukrainian and Iranian theatres in turn; it presents the critique of Russian strategy advanced by John HELMER; and it synthesises these strands into the concept of strategic-closure denial.

2. The Strategy of Denial: Doctrine and Provenance

The intellectual architecture of contemporary American strategy was articulated by Elbridge COLBY, principal author of the 2018 National Defense Strategy in the first TRUMP administration, subsequently Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and author of *The Strategy of Denial* (Colby, 2021). The 2018 strategy document announced the doctrinal turn in a single sentence:

“Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”

(US Department of Defense, 2018: 1)

COLBY's book supplies the theory behind that turn, and identifies its driver at the outset:

“Above all, this is because of the rise of China. Napoleon is supposed to have remarked that, when China rose, the world would quake. China has now arisen—and is continuing to rise. And the world is quaking. For the first time since the nineteenth century, the United States no longer boasts the world's indisputably largest economy. As a result, we are witnessing a return to what is commonly referred to as ‘great power competition.’ This is a euphemism for an almost physical reality:

an object so large must have the greatest consequence for any system that must accommodate it. China's enormous size and sophistication mean that its rise will be of the utmost significance. It is one thing to describe the phenomenon; it is another thing to understand how to react to it."

(Colby, 2021, Introduction)

The book's essential formulation — which explains both the U.S.-European strategy towards Russia in Ukraine and the U.S.-Israeli strategy towards Iran — is the following, in which COLBY describes the opening movement of his own argument:

"...this introduces the central role of balances of power, with an emphasis on the core objective of denying any other state hegemony over one of the world's key regions in order to preserve Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity. It explains why Asia is the world's most important region, given its wealth and power, and why China is the world's other most important state. Like other very powerful states, China has a most potent interest in establishing hegemony over its region, and, predictably, Beijing appears to be pursuing this goal. Denying China hegemony over Asia is therefore the cardinal objective of US grand strategy."

(Colby, 2021, Introduction)

The method is the anti-hegemonic coalition, whose logic COLBY sets out in full:

"....it explains why favorable regional balances of power matter for US strategy. It describes the role of anti-hegemonic coalitions in upholding such balances, namely, by leaguining together enough states to agglomerate more power than an aspiring regional hegemon and its confederates can muster. This chapter describes the challenges to forming and sustaining such coalitions in the face of an aspiring regional hegemon, especially when the aspirant employs a focused and sequential strategy designed to short-circuit or break apart any such coalition. Such a strategy allows the aspiring hegemon to focus on and isolate coalition members in sequence, progressively weakening the

coalition until the aspirant is able to achieve its hegemony. This problem points to the importance of a cornerstone balancer—especially an external cornerstone balancer—and the United States' unique ability to play this role. Last, the chapter explains why the United States must focus on playing this role in Asia, given that an anti-hegemonic coalition is unlikely to form against China without America doing so and the much better prospects that such coalitions will form and sustain themselves in other key regions with a more modest American contribution.”
(Colby, 2021, Introduction)

The logic of denial is transferable — and reversible. Applied to Russia and Iran, it prescribes not their defeat in a decisive engagement, nor a negotiated settlement, but the denial of victory: the prevention of any outcome that would consolidate their regional position. And the ‘focused and sequential strategy’ that COLBY attributes to an aspiring hegemon — isolating and weakening coalition members in sequence — describes with some precision what Washington itself practises against the emerging counter-coalition of Russia, Iran and their partners: Palestine, Lebanon, Iran and Ukraine are prosecuted as one sequenced campaign to prevent a hostile regional agglomeration from consolidating. NAKAO (2022) supplies the conceptual vocabulary, distinguishing denial strategies, which prevent the adversary from achieving its objective, from punishment strategies, which impose costs intended to change its political calculations. Western strategy in Ukraine and Iran combines both — denial on the battlefield, punishment through sanctions — while withholding the diplomatic instrument that would convert either into peace.

3. Denial and the Science of War Termination

The scholarly literature on war termination explains precisely why a strategy of denial produces open-ended war. Its central findings can be stated briefly:

- **Wars end as bargains, not verdicts.** WITTMAN (1979) demonstrated that wars end only when the parties' expected returns from continued fighting no longer exceed the available settlement. A strategy that manipulates those expected returns — by sustaining one belligerent externally — postpones termination indefinitely.

- **Fighting and negotiating are one process.** WAGNER (2000) showed that war and negotiation are not separate activities: fighting alters bargaining power while negotiations continue under battlefield conditions. PILLAR (1983) treated war termination as coercive bargaining rather than a neutral diplomatic exercise — which is exactly how denial employs diplomacy.
- **Commitment problems prolong war.** FEARON (1995) identified private information, incentives to misrepresent, and commitment problems as the rationalist causes of continued war; POWELL (2006) showed why a declining party rejects settlement when it believes the victor will use growing power to impose progressively harsher terms. REITER (2009) demonstrated that battlefield results do not automatically terminate wars where the loser cannot trust the victor to honour a settlement.
- **Leaders gamble for resurrection.** GOEMANS (2000a; 2000b) showed that leaders who expect exile, imprisonment or death following defeat have powerful incentives to continue losing wars; STANLEY (2009) showed that peace may require changes within domestic ruling coalitions themselves.
- **The power to hurt is bargaining power.** SLANTCHEV (2003) argued that the capacity to hurt the opponent constitutes bargaining power, and that losing this capacity can matter more for termination than battlefield defeat — the theoretical core of HELMER's critique examined below.
- **Spoilers and fragile settlements.** STEDMAN (1997) analysed actors who obstruct peace because the emerging settlement threatens their interests — the canonical account of diplomacy used to delay or sabotage strategic closure. FORTNA (2003) and WERNER (1998) showed why battlefield gains do not translate automatically into durable, accepted political terms.
- **Attrition dominates bargaining.** LANGLOIS and LANGLOIS (2012) demonstrated that attritional behaviour may dominate bargaining until one party's victory becomes imminent — explaining why negotiations remain ineffective even after the military balance has shifted decisively.

IKLÉ (2005 [1971]) supplied the foundational insight: governments struggle institutionally to stop wars even after their original objectives have become unattainable. The strategy of denial weaponises this pathology. It does not merely fail to end wars; it is designed not to end them.

4. Stasis, Frozen Conflicts and Punctuated Conflict Stasis

The operational condition that denial seeks to produce is best captured by combining two bodies of thought: the peace-and-conflict-studies literature on frozen conflicts, and the classical Greek concept of stasis. The two concepts are related but distinct, and their combination yields the notion of punctuated conflict stasis introduced above.

4.1 Frozen conflicts

The term ‘frozen conflict’ entered the vocabulary of international politics in the 1990s to describe situations — from the Korean peninsula to the South Caucasus to Ukraine — in which full-scale fighting had stopped but the conflict was not resolved and could slip back into violence. SMETANA and LUDVÍK provide the most rigorous conceptualisation:

“We define frozen conflict as a protracted, post-war conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between the opposing sides.”

(Smetana and Ludvík, 2018)

On their account a frozen conflict must be international, protracted and post-war; its core issues must remain unresolved; and it must lack stable peace. Crucially, their model is dynamic rather than static. Frozen conflicts are not paused; they cycle:

“a frozen conflict undergoes a periodical ‘thawing’ in mutual relations between the opposing sides: either toward diplomatic negotiations (‘peaceful thawing’) or re-escalation toward use of armed force (‘violent thawing’).”

(Smetana and Ludvík, 2018)

When thawing stops short of transformation, the conflict re-freezes, and the cycle resumes. LEGUCKA supplies the geopolitical dimension of the concept, derived from the post-Soviet cases of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria and — as she argued presciently of Donbas — eastern Ukraine:

“a frozen conflict is a situation in which active armed conflict has ended but there is no possibility to solve the root of the conflict. At the same time, in the disputed territory a quasi-state has been created, supported by a stronger power from the outside, and used as leverage in the outside agent’s foreign policy.”

(Legucka, 2017: 82)

Two features of her analysis matter here:

- **First — frozen conflicts are instruments.** The external patron holds the conflict deliberately unresolved and uses it as **leverage** — a strategic paradigm she describes as **‘controlled instability’** (Legucka, 2017: 84).
- **Second — the frozen condition corrodes the affected states internally:**

“Today’s frozen conflicts are deeply rooted in the reality of the states and societies of post-Soviet states, becoming a constant element of everyday life, a state of peace and war, a gray zone of criminal prosperity.”

(Legucka, 2017: 94)

The frozen-conflict literature has applied this instrumental logic principally to Russia’s conduct in the post-Soviet space. The present argument extends the same logic to the United States and NATO: as external cornerstone balancer, Washington holds entire wars — not merely post-war territorial disputes — in calibrated suspension, freezing and unfreezing them as strategy requires.

4.2 Stasis

Stasis (Greek: στάσις, stásis) originally meant ‘standing’, ‘standing still’ or ‘taking a stand’. From that basic sense it developed several distinct meanings.

In classical Greek political thought — its most consequential register — stasis denoted civil strife, factional conflict or civil war within a political community: a condition in which citizens cease to act as a single polity and divide into hostile factions competing for power. THUCYDIDES’ account of the civil war at Corcyra is the classic description of such a fracture, in which political conflict escalated into brutality and even language itself became distorted by partisan struggle (Thucydides, 1972: III.82–84).

In the classical rhetorical tradition, stasis named the precise point at issue in a dispute — the question that must be settled before argument can proceed. In medicine, stasis denotes the abnormal slowing or stoppage of a flow; in general usage, a condition of little or no movement, change or development. Contemporary political theory has revived the Greek political sense to describe polarisation so profound that rival groups no longer recognise one another as members of the same political community.

Two of these senses matter for the present argument:

- **The general sense — arrested movement** — describes the state of the conflict itself: **combat suspended, settlement withheld**, the flow towards termination stopped.
- **The Greek political sense — internal fracture** — describes the state that denial ultimately seeks to induce within the adversary: a **divided, factionalised regime and society**, the ‘weakened and fragmented Russia’ of declared Western policy.

4.3 Punctuated conflict stasis

The two concepts differ and relate as follows. A frozen conflict is stasis between political communities: the war stops but does not end, and the parties remain locked in a suspended contest. Greek stasis is conflict within a political community: the community itself divides against itself. The strategy of denial pursues both, in sequence. It freezes and unfreezes the interstate conflict — punctuating it with pauses, negotiations, escalations and phases of attrition — in order, over the *longue durée*, to produce stasis inside the adversary: the fracture of its regime and political community.

Punctuated conflict stasis may therefore be defined as **the deliberate maintenance of a war in suspended animation — neither ended by settlement nor allowed to reach decision — through calibrated punctuations of intensity, escalation, attrition, pause and resumed escalation**, with the ulterior objective not merely of freezing the conflict between the belligerents but of **inducing stasis within the adversary: dividing and fracturing the opposing regime and political community** until it can no longer sustain the contest. Diplomacy supplies the punctuation marks: ceasefires and negotiations that pause the fighting without closing the war. The concept therefore goes beyond ‘freezing

the conflict' as generally understood in the literature. The freeze is a phase, not the end-state; the intended end-state is the internal fracture of the enemy.

SMETANA and LUDVÍK's cyclical model — frozen conflict, thawing, thawing peak, re-freezing — describes precisely the rhythm that denial administers. What their model treats as an emergent dynamic of the conflict, the strategy of denial employs as a deliberate technique, with the external cornerstone balancer controlling the thermostat.

5. Ukraine: Strategic Patience and the Open Wound

The Ukrainian theatre displays the strategy in its purest form. In April 2022, at Istanbul, Ukrainian and Russian negotiators had drafted the outline of a settlement. According to reporting by Ukrainska Pravda, citing sources in ZELENSKY's inner circle, the then British Prime Minister Boris JOHNSON used his surprise visit to Kyiv to carry two messages designed to break off the negotiations:

"Putin is a war criminal; he should be pressured, not negotiated with"

(Johnson's message to Kyiv, as reported by Ukrainska Pravda;
Common Dreams, 2022)

The second message was that even if Ukraine were ready to sign agreements with PUTIN, the West was not (Common Dreams, 2022). The deal that could have ended the war in its opening months was abandoned — a sabotage subsequently corroborated by Ukraine's own parliamentary leader David ARAKHAMIA, who stated in November 2023 that the talks broke down partly because of JOHNSON's opposition to a settlement (Larres and Zhong, 2024).

JOHNSON himself supplied the strategic vocabulary, in a newspaper article published two months after he had killed the Istanbul track. Writing in The Sunday Times on 19 June 2022, on his return from a second visit to Kyiv, he declared:

"I am afraid that we need to steel ourselves for a long war"

(Johnson, writing in The Sunday Times, 19 June 2022; quoted in
Kiley, 2022)

as PUTIN, he wrote, resorted to a campaign of attrition to grind Ukraine down. Ukraine's foreign backers, he urged, should hold their nerve to ensure it possessed the 'strategic endurance' to survive and eventually prevail; time was now the vital factor, and the task of the West was to enlist time on Ukraine's side (Al Jazeera, 2022). Returning to the House of Commons in September 2022, he restated the doctrine, declaring it more vital than ever that the West possess 'the strategic patience to hold our nerve' until Ukraine recaptured its territory (Johnson, quoted in BBC News, 2022). Visiting Kyiv again in January 2023, he insisted that 'the only way to end this war is for Ukraine to win' (Johnson, quoted in BBC News, 2023).

Strategic endurance and strategic patience are denial's temporal doctrine: maintaining and tightening pressure over the *longue durée* is an ongoing process that requires keeping the conflict open — an open wound — because negotiations would simply end the war on Russian terms. The sequence is itself the argument: the settlement is sabotaged in April; the long war is announced in June; patience is preached in September. Diplomacy is not being attempted and failing; it is being withheld. In the vocabulary of Section 4, Istanbul, Minsk before it, and every subsequent ceasefire initiative function as punctuation marks in a punctuated conflict stasis: pauses that interrupt combat without closing the war, while the pressure intended to fracture the Russian state — sanctions, isolation, attrition — continues uninterrupted.

The RAND Corporation's own analysts recognised the trajectory. CHARAP and PRIEBE (2023) examined how external support can sustain or shorten the conflict and warned explicitly against an open-ended long war; FREDERICK et al. (2025) showed that foreign intervention and non-battlefield conditions may determine whether military gains ever become durable political outcomes; CONNELL et al. (2025) warned that a ceasefire may provide merely an operational pause rather than durable political closure; and CONNABLE et al. (2018) demonstrated that material indicators alone do not predict whether states keep fighting — political cohesion and external support may override military inferiority. BENSACHEL et al. (2013) had already observed that defence establishments devote far more attention to fighting wars than to designing their endings.

The strategy nonetheless confronts a structural problem:

- **First — attrition is asymmetric.** Russian battlefield successes are making it difficult for Ukraine to continue the fight indefinitely: attrition is asymmetric in **manpower, materiel and fires**.
- **Second — and decisively — Russia has not found a way to impose costs on the West itself.** Herein lies the **Russian strategic error**: Russia imposes costs on Ukraine — **the instrument** — but no costs on the real attacker, the **U.S.-NATO system** that finances, arms, targets and sustains the war. For Western electorates the war remains **comparatively painless**, sustained at what their governments judge an **acceptable domestic cost**. **Denial can therefore continue even as its Ukrainian instrument weakens.**

6. Iran: Counter-Denial and the Imposition of Costs

The Iranian theatre inverts this asymmetry. Unlike Russia, Iran is raising the costs of the war for its adversaries directly — in blood (casualties and body bags), prices (inflation, consumer pockets and insurance costs) and asset values (share prices) — whilst cutting the supply, delivery and sensor networks of the United States and its allies in the Middle East and degrading their forward-basing infrastructure with precision strikes.

Iran's decisive instrument is geographic: its position astride the Strait of Hormuz, through which a large share of the world's traded oil and liquefied gas must pass. The credible threat to this chokepoint transmits the war directly into Western energy prices, shipping and insurance markets, and thereby into the household budgets of Western voters and the portfolios of Western ruling classes. In SLANTCHEV's (2003) terms, Iran retains and exercises the power to hurt — and it is this capacity, rather than any prospect of conventional victory over the United States or Israel, that constitutes its bargaining power.

Denial, in other words, works both ways. The West seeks to deny Iran victory; Iran seeks to deny the West a cost-free war. Because Iran is visibly increasing the costs borne by the United States — in casualties, in energy and consumer prices, and in stock and asset prices — it stands a better chance of imposing its will despite the U.S. strategy of victory-denial than does Russia, which directs its firepower at the instrument rather than the author of the war against it. It is precisely this contrast that the analyst John HELMER places at the centre of his critique of Russian strategy.

7. The HELMER Thesis: Learning from the Iranian Model

John HELMER has argued repeatedly on Dances with Bears that Russia should learn from what he regards as the Iranian model of strategic warfare rather than continue what he characterises as a cautious, symmetrical approach in Ukraine (Helmer, n.d. a; n.d. b). This is his interpretation and analysis; it is not the official position of the Russian government or military. His argument can be summarised in five points:

- **First — impose costs on the real decision-makers, not only the battlefield opponent.** Iran understands that defeating the United States or Israel conventionally is unrealistic; it therefore raises the political and economic costs for its adversaries through regional leverage, disruption of trade, and pressure on assets and allies. Russia has focused too narrowly on defeating Ukrainian forces while allowing NATO governments and societies to bear relatively little direct cost.
- **Second — escalation should be asymmetric.** Iran does not respond ‘tit for tat’; it looks for vulnerabilities elsewhere in the strategic system. Russia, by contrast, has been constrained by PUTIN’s doctrine of ‘mirrored’ or symmetrical responses.
- **Third — Ukraine is only one theatre.** The conflict is fundamentally with the United States and NATO; Russia should therefore respond across multiple domains — diplomacy, economics, maritime pressure, cyber operations, and support for partners such as Iran and China — rather than concentrating almost exclusively on operations inside Ukraine.
- **Fourth — the Strait of Hormuz as the model.** Iran can influence global energy markets through a single chokepoint; Russia lacks an equivalent mechanism for imposing immediate costs on Western electorates.
- **Fifth — pressure the political will, not merely the army.** Modern wars are contests of political endurance. Iran seeks to alter the political calculations of its adversaries by raising the perceived costs of continued confrontation; Russia has concentrated on attritional battlefield operations while Western support for Ukraine continues at acceptable domestic cost.

HELMER’s framework identifies three interconnected transmission mechanisms through which war makes a great power politically vulnerable: blood (casualties

and body bags capable of weakening public consent for war); prices (inflation, consumer pockets and insurance costs, through which geopolitical conflict reaches the voter directly); and asset values (share prices, and the disruption of the financial, commodity and shipping markets on which they rest, particularly through impacts on grain exports and maritime risk). Iran transmits such pain to American voters and allied ruling classes through Hormuz; Russia, HELMER states explicitly, has failed to send a comparable 'message of pain' to US voters (Helmer, n.d. a).

His criticism of PUTIN is correspondingly sharp. Across numerous articles he argues that PUTIN has:

- placed excessive trust in negotiations with Washington;
- limited military escalation through publicly declared 'red lines';
- preferred proportional responses rather than exploiting asymmetric leverage; and
- missed opportunities to increase the strategic costs borne by NATO governments.

The critique is economic as well as operational. Whereas Western governments sanction Russian oligarchs and state-linked enterprises, Moscow has not imposed equivalent costs on the American financiers, technology corporations and wealthy investors whose artificial-intelligence, satellite and data systems support Ukraine. These highly valued and heavily financialised technology interests constitute, on HELMER's reasoning, a strategic vulnerability: sufficiently effective pressure could undermine investor confidence and expose the speculative character of the AI boom. Operationally, Russia has not comprehensively interdicted the external system sustaining Ukraine: the Polish land corridor remains functional; the Odesa-region and Danube ports continue to handle military and commercial traffic; and Black Sea routes remain available for intelligence, drone operations and targeting support. Ukraine consequently continues to operate as a Western-supported firing platform (Helmer, n.d. b).

HELMER further argues that the Strategic Agreement between Russia and Iran prohibits the delivery of weapons to enemies attacking either party. The Turkish request to Russia for permission to transfer its S-400 system to an unspecified GCC country is therefore a major test for Russia: its allies are watching closely to see whether it is a reliable partner.

It must be recorded that this reflects HELMER's own strategic assessment, which is debated among analysts. Other scholars argue that Russia's more measured approach is a deliberate attempt to manage escalation risks, preserve strategic stability, and avoid a wider direct conflict with NATO.

8. Non-Western Strategic Traditions of Protraction and Denial

The strategy of denying an adversary the fruits of military superiority is not a Western invention; the strongest theoretical foundations for prolonging war, denying closure and manipulating negotiations lie in non-Western traditions:

- SUN TZU (1963) separates battlefield combat from political-strategic victory, stressing deception, indirect pressure and preventing the enemy from converting strength into decisive advantage.
- KAUTILYA's Arthashastra (2013) treats peace agreements, truces and negotiations as instruments within an ongoing strategic contest — temporary expedients rather than definitive settlements.
- MAO Tse-tung (1967) theorised protracted war: a militarily weaker party avoids decisive defeat, extends the conflict and changes the political and material balance over time.
- VO NGUYEN GIAP (1962) explained how a weaker party can deny a conventionally superior opponent political victory by prolonging resistance until the stronger power's domestic and strategic will collapses.
- QIAO and WANG (1999) extended conflict beyond the kinetic battlefield into finance, technology, information, law, trade and infrastructure: battlefield superiority need not produce strategic closure while other domains remain contested.

Iran's strategy synthesises these traditions; HELMER's complaint is that Russia's does not.

9. Strategic-Closure Denial: A Synthesis

The literature and the two theatres examined here support the following analytical formulation. Strategic-closure denial occurs when a party that can no longer secure a favourable outcome through direct kinetic warfare prevents its adversary from converting battlefield superiority into an enforceable political settlement. It may do so by:

- refusing negotiations, or participating in negotiations primarily to delay implementation;
- exploiting credible-commitment fears (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2006);
- mobilising external sponsors and maintaining economic or technological support networks;
- preserving sufficient coercive capacity to deny the victor a stable post-war order (Slantchev, 2003; Stedman, 1997).

Strategic-closure denial is the mechanism; punctuated conflict stasis is the condition it produces — a war held between freeze and thaw, its pauses supplied by instrumentalised diplomacy, its ulterior aim the internal fracture of the adversary. In Ukraine, it is the West that practises strategic-closure denial against Russia: sustaining Ukraine externally, obstructing settlement, and converting diplomacy into an instrument of delay while sanctions and attrition work towards stasis inside the Russian state. In the Iranian theatre, it is Iran that denies the United States and Israel strategic closure, by preserving and exercising the power to hurt across multiple domains. The difference between the two theatres — and the core of HELMER's argument — is that Iran makes denial expensive for its enemies, whereas Russia has so far allowed it to remain cheap.

10. Conclusion

Denial is a strategy of the open wound. It deliberately suspends the mechanisms — bargaining, credible commitment, enforceable settlement — by which wars end. The war-termination literature from WITTMAN (1979) to LANGLOIS and LANGLOIS (2012) warns of the consequence: attrition dominates bargaining until one side's victory becomes imminent, and settlements imposed without credibility collapse into renewed war (Fortna, 2003).

Three conclusions follow:

- **First — the Russian strategic error** is to impose costs on Ukraine but no costs on the real attacker, the **U.S.-NATO**. Unless Russia learns from Iran and imposes costs in **blood** (casualties and body bags), **prices** (inflation, consumer pockets and insurance costs) and **asset values** (share prices) on the states and interests sustaining the war, it will not succeed in achieving its strategic war aims: its battlefield victories will accumulate without ever

converting into an **enforceable settlement**, because the party that must be coerced into settlement feels no pain — and the **punctuated stasis** will, as designed, migrate inward, towards the intended **fracture of the Russian state itself**.

- **Second — Iran has the better likelihood of imposing its will.** Iran is visibly increasing the costs of the war for the United States despite the U.S. strategy of victory-denial: in SLANTCHEV's (2003) terms, it is the belligerent that retains the **power to hurt**.
- **Third — denial without a theory of termination** risks producing wars that neither side can end on acceptable terms — a formula for **indefinite escalation** across **blood** (casualties and body bags), **prices** (inflation, consumer pockets and insurance costs) and **asset values** (share prices).

Every war must end (Iklé, 2005 [1971]); a strategy expressly designed to prevent wars from ending must ultimately answer for what it is keeping open.

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