

## **The U.S. Military Was Losing Its Edge. After Iran, Everyone Knows It. The Editorial Board , The New York Times, April 30, 2026**

On paper, the war in Iran should not be much of a contest. The United States spends around \$1 trillion a year on its military, more than 100 times as much as Iran. That money buys a vastly larger Air Force and Navy, as well as advanced weapons technologies that Iranian generals can only dream about.

In the war's early days, the mismatch played out as one might expect. American forces destroyed much of the Iranian military. Now, however, the contest looks less one-sided. Iran has taken control of the Strait of Hormuz, and its missiles and drones still threaten America's allies in the region. While President Trump seems eager for a negotiated truce, Iran's leaders do not. Somehow, the weaker nation is in the stronger negotiating position.

That reality exposes the vulnerabilities in the American way of war. Tactical success has not yielded victory. Mr. Trump's recklessness in conducting the war is one reason. But the problem is bigger than any single commander in chief. The United States has left itself unprepared for modern war.

America has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on ships and planes that are good at defeating competitors' ships and planes but ineffective against cheaper, mass-produced weapons. The American economy does not have the industrial capacity to produce enough of the weapons and equipment it does need. And the country has struggled to fix these problems because of a sclerotic government and a consolidated defense industry that resists change. [...]

"Never in recorded history has a nation's military been so quickly and effectively neutralized," Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth claimed on March 26. The next day, Iran launched a drone and missile attack on an American base in Saudi Arabia that wounded more than a dozen service members, destroyed a radar surveillance plane and damaged at least two refueling tankers.

The immediate debunking of Mr. Hegseth's bombast points to the reform agenda that America's military needs. There are four main priorities.

First, the United States needs to invest in counter-drone technologies, like those that Ukraine has developed in its war against Russia. The lack of such defenses is one reason that the vaunted U.S. Navy has been unable to prevent the closing of a vital waterway, the Strait of Hormuz.

Second, the United States needs more of its own cheap, disposable weapons like one-way attack drones and unmanned ships. Although much of the war in Ukraine has been fought by mass-produced drones, the Pentagon is pouring money into much more complex equipment, including pilotless "wingmen" that can fly alongside a piloted plane.

Third, the country needs larger and more flexible industrial capacity. Until recently, a single factory made all of America's Tomahawk cruise missiles, and there is a constant shortage of Patriot missile interceptors. Congress should pass laws that help the private sector build up its manufacturing capacity. The Pentagon, for its part, needs to stop buying so many of its weapons from just five big weapons makers and start betting on dynamic tech companies that can quickly adapt.

Lastly, the United States needs to collaborate with other industrialized democracies. Mr. Trump's pleas for help in reopening the Strait of Hormuz from the very allies he spurned at the start of the war is just the latest proof that America can't go it alone. In the years ahead, keeping pace with China's economic and military expansion will require collaborating with like-minded democracies.

All of these steps are not merely about winning the next war. They also can help prevent it — by making our enemies believe they would lose any war they start. [...]