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Iran and history's *longue durée*

Now that the Islamic Republic and the United States have signed a preliminary agreement (digitally, without ceremony), my mind—my American mind, it is best I note—reaches back to a couple of momentous events in the postwar past. One is the Chinese Revolution, when, on 1 October 1949, Mao led the Red Army into Beijing and declared the People's Republic. The other occurred on 30 April 1975, when the People's Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong took the South Vietnamese capital and the last Americans left on helicopters from the U.S. Embassy's rooftop. This latter is commonly called the Fall of Saigon. Anyone who understands the *longue durée* of history will recognize “the Rise of Saigon” as the truer term.

It is instructive to consider these two world-historical turns now that Tehran and Washington have entered upon an accord that extends the failed ceasefire agreed in April for an additional 60 days. They suggest, for better but I anticipate worse, what is to come during and after these next two months of more detailed talks intended to lead to a comprehensive settlement between the Iranians and the Americans.

The virtues of the just-signed memorandum of understanding, so far as I can make out, are two.

One, most of the large outstanding questions that lie between the Islamic Republic and the United States are deferred. The Trump regime would not otherwise have been able to sign it. While I rate the possibility of an enduring peace accord slim, the possibility of such an outcome opens.

Two, even the rudimentary terms set out in the just-signed M.O.U. represent a dramatic capitulation on the part of the Americans. Many are those who consider the memo “a catastrophe” or “a very bad deal,” or “an ignominy.” My view is perpendicular to all these. In recognizing Iran’s sovereignty, its rights under international law, its claims to long-frozen assets, and the justice of a U.S.–funded reconstruction program of one or another kind, the memorandum serves the deserving nation and denies its aggressor’s objectives.

It is time, I mean to say, to conclude that the United States, along with Israel, its spear-bearing client, have lost this war and that—the most important thing—it was never to be any other way. Iran’s victory reflects, neatly and symmetrically, the rise of the non–West as a (many-sided) pole of power—this the *longue durée* as we have it in the third decade of the 21st century.

What might the past—America’s past in such matters—suggest as to what the future has in store?

A bitter, gruesome fight broke out in Washington after Mao defeated Chang Kai-shek, long and lavishly backed by the United States, and forced the Nationalists

across the Taiwan Strait. This is known in American history as the “Who Lost China?” argument. The China Lobby, ancestor of our Taiwan Lobby, accused the Truman State Department of rampant Communist sympathies. The rightist rampage that ensued ruined the careers of many distinguished diplomats. It is worth naming a few as a matter of honoring them. John Service, John Vincent, John Davies: The State Department’s China desk has never recovered from the witch hunts that forced these and others, superbly trained and experienced, from their positions.

A quarter-century later the press and the television news broadcasters lost the war against the Vietnamese people. Or the antiwar movement lost it. Or “doves” on Capitol Hill such as George McGovern and Eugene McCarthy lost it. Or the sympathizers (again) at State. What followed, from the Reagan administration onward, were perverse years during which the Americans were recast as the victims of those they had spent decades victimizing.

It was two decades and some before the United States—oddly enough led by Richard Nixon, a committed hawk during the Who Lost China? days—learned to accept the People’s Republic’s legitimacy; formal recognition came only in 1979. Everyone knows the Americans lost the Vietnam war, everyone knew it as soon as the last helicopters lifted off, but there has not to this day been an official acknowledgment that the Vietnamese defeated the United States. “Peace with honor” is as far as Washington has ever got.

Neither China nor Vietnam were ever America's to lose, to state the perfectly obvious. America had wars to lose, and so it did. I have sometimes argued that the United States cannot lose anything. But I refer here to what a good American writer once called our "victory culture"—the myth of eternal triumph. No, America can lose wars and has lost a number of them since the 1945 surrenders. It cannot admit to losing: This is the problem—a problem because all manner of messes are bound to ensue in consequence of this refusal.



It is remarkable how quickly the infighting and accusations began as news spread that the Trump regime, desperate to get the Strait of Hormuz reopened, as was evident to all, had negotiated a preliminary accord with Tehran. The M.O.U. had not been signed and its terms had not even been made public before all the noise commenced. But no matter. Somewhere beneath all the adverse commentary, the subliminal conceit—perfectly aligned with the Israeli view—seemed to be that any agreement with the Iranians had to be a bad agreement.

And so to the "Who Lost Iran?" argument. Trump, with his inconstancy, his lack of resolve, and his obsession with petroleum prices and the financial markets, lost it. He should have "finished the job." Vice-President J.D. Vance, an opponent of the war from the first, lost it with his advocacy of a swift exit on expedient terms. "Trump has found a new way to fail us," as Bret Stephens, the exuberantly Zionist columnist at *The New York Times* put it in a piece published Thursday. As Trump remarked as the text of the accord became public, "If it fails I'll blame Vance."

And this, from David French, one of the more openly reactionary voices in *The Times*'s opinion pages. I will quote French at length to capture the underlying chagrin typical of what has come out post-signature in corporate media:

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I'm not going to belabor the reasons I believe that Iran has defeated the United States and Israel (at least in this round), but...it's hard to claim victory when you achieve none of your war aims, and your enemy appears to have achieved most of his.

According to the terms of the memorandum, Hezbollah, incredibly enough, enjoys an *enhanced* degree of diplomatic protection. The agreement is supposed to end the fighting in Lebanon and guarantee Lebanese territorial integrity at the same time Israel is invading the country.

In addition, Iran receives immediate relief from the American blockade and immediate access to billions of dollars in frozen funds. Iran may also receive a bonanza of reconstruction funds, and the nuclear limitations on Iran already appear less robust than those that President Barack Obama was able to negotiate in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (better known simply as the "Iran deal") in 2015, which President Trump ripped up in 2018.

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No one in America matches the Israelis in this line—crude, offensive, and self-serving as they are on all such occasions. Nir Dvori, a commentator at Channel 12, a rightist broadcaster (even by Israeli standards), called the M.O.U. “a diplomatic October 7.” David Horovitz, editor of *The Times of Israel*, writes it off as “a catastrophic capitulation.” And from Yaakov Amidor, formerly one of Bibi Netanyahu’s national security advisers: “It’s a bad agreement for which the Americans are paying in cash, and got, at the maximum, a letter of intent.”

Nobody lost Iran, or will lose it as negotiations proceed—assuming they do, all things being uncertain at this early moment. Iran was nobody’s to lose, as China was not in the late 1940s or Vietnam in the mid-1970s. Another war was America’s to lose, and it has done so, adding to the list of its other post-1945 defeats.

Iran has won and will now advance to a final victory one or another way. What could make this plainer than the clause in the 14-point memorandum requiring the U.S. military to remove its forces from Iran’s “proximity” and “surrounding areas” within 30 days of a final accord? This marks the beginning of Iran’s overarching aspiration—to remake West Asia as a post-Western region. The Islamic Republic has not emerged a world power after these past months of war and tension, as many have remarked. But its influence will henceforth be felt worldwide, and I can think of no clearer case in point.

In what sometimes seems a kind of narrow fascination—war porn, as some commentators call it—we can assign Iran’s success to its inventory of drones, or

its nimble speedboats, or its extensive underground sites loaded with missiles in the mountains above the Strait of Hormuz. These things counted, certainly. So have Iran's spirit and resolve and its capacity to learn from experience and history as the United States simply never does. But I look also to history, and within it the many stories it tells us about rising and falling powers.

How will America lose once again? What will it do in response to "the Rise of Iran?" How will it lose without facing defeat—lose without losing, this is to say? What messes will it make this time? Surely, there are some coming. This last bears an especially heavy load given the Zionist regime's recklessness and its egregious influence over the United States.

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