

Gunboat Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Case Study of the United States- Israel and Iran Conflict (2026)

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ABSTRACT

The 2026 conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran represents a contemporary manifestation of gunboat diplomacy, characterized by the strategic use of military force, naval power, and economic coercion to achieve political objectives. This paper critically examines the evolution of gunboat diplomacy in the context of modern international relations, with particular focus on the interplay between coercion and diplomacy in the 2026 war.

Using a qualitative research design and a case study approach, the study analyses the dynamics of military engagement, diplomatic negotiations, and economic sanctions. It argues that while gunboat diplomacy remains a central instrument of statecraft, its application has become increasingly complex due to technological advancements, global interdependence, and evolving legal norms. The findings highlight the risks of escalation, the erosion of multilateralism, and the need for balanced approaches to conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gunboat diplomacy has historically been associated with the projection of naval power to coerce weaker states into compliance. Rooted in 19th-century imperial practices, it has evolved into a broader framework encompassing military threats, economic sanctions, and strategic signalling. In the 21st century, gunboat diplomacy persists in more sophisticated forms, particularly in regions characterized by geopolitical tensions and strategic rivalries.

The 2026 war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran provides a compelling case study for examining the contemporary relevance of this concept. The conflict emerged following the breakdown of diplomatic negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme and escalated into a series of coordinated military operations, including airstrikes, cyber operations, and naval deployments. The strategic importance of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz further amplified the global implications of the conflict.

This paper seeks to analyse the extent to which the 2026 war reflects traditional gunboat diplomacy or represents a hybrid model incorporating modern tools of coercion. It also explores the implications of such strategies for international law, global governance, and regional stability.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to critically examine the application of gunboat diplomacy in the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict and assess its relevance in contemporary international relations. The study aims to bridge the gap between classical theories of coercive diplomacy and modern geopolitical realities.

Specifically, the objectives are to:

- Analyse the role of military force and naval power in shaping diplomatic outcomes;
- Evaluate the interaction between coercion and negotiation;

- Assess the implications for international law and multilateral institutions;
- Provide policy-oriented recommendations for reducing reliance on coercive strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on gunboat diplomacy is deeply rooted in classical international relations theory. Early scholars such as Morgenthau emphasized the centrality of power in international politics, arguing that states pursue national interests through the accumulation and projection of power (Morgenthau 1948:13).

Schelling's theory of coercive diplomacy further refined this understanding by distinguishing between brute force and coercion, highlighting the strategic use of limited force to influence adversaries (Schelling 1966:3). Coercion, in this sense, relies on credible threats and calculated restraint.

Contemporary scholars have expanded this framework to include economic sanctions, cyber warfare, and hybrid strategies. Freedman argues that modern coercion involves a combination of military and non-military tools, emphasizing the importance of signalling and credibility (Freedman 2013:45). Similarly, Byman and Waxman contend that coercive diplomacy is most effective when integrated with diplomatic engagement (Byman and Waxman 2002:28).

Recent analyses of the 2026 conflict suggest that it represents a convergence of traditional and modern forms of coercion. The use of targeted airstrikes, naval deployments, and economic sanctions reflects a multi-dimensional approach to power projection (Freeman 2026:30). However, critics argue that such strategies risk undermining international legal norms and escalating conflicts beyond control (Khan 2026:52).

Furthermore, the literature highlights the growing importance of economic and technological factors in shaping contemporary conflicts. The integration of cyber capabilities and financial sanctions into military strategies underscores the evolving nature of gunboat diplomacy (Allison 2017:77).

One of the earliest and most prominent examples is the use of gunboat diplomacy by the United Kingdom during the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) against China. British naval superiority was employed to force China to open its markets to trade, including opium. The outcome was the imposition of unequal treaties, including the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded Hong Kong to Britain and granted extensive commercial privileges (Fairbank 1978:213). This case illustrates the effectiveness of gunboat diplomacy in achieving immediate strategic objectives, albeit at the cost of long-term resentment and instability.

Similarly, the United States employed gunboat diplomacy in Japan through Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition (1853–1854). The arrival of U.S. naval forces in Edo Bay compelled Japan to end its policy of isolation and sign the Convention of Kanagawa. The outcome was the opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade and the eventual transformation of Japan into a modern industrial state (Beasley 1995:45). While coercive in nature, this instance demonstrates that gunboat diplomacy can produce long-term structural change, including modernization and integration into the international system.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States frequently relied on naval power during the late 19th and early 20th centuries under the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Interventions in countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Dominican Republic involved the deployment of naval forces to secure economic and political interests (LaFeber 1993:102). The outcomes included the establishment of U.S. influence in the region, stabilization of financial systems, and, in some cases, prolonged political dependency and domestic resentment.

European powers also used gunboat diplomacy extensively in Africa and Asia during the colonial period. For example, France employed naval force in West Africa to establish colonial control, while Germany used similar tactics during the late 19th century to secure concessions in territories such as present-day Tanzania (Pakenham 1991:312). The outcomes were the consolidation of colonial rule and extraction of resources, but these actions also laid the foundations for future resistance movements and post-colonial instability.

In the early 20th century, gunboat diplomacy was also evident in the actions of Italy during its invasion of Libya (1911–1912), where naval bombardments were used to weaken Ottoman control. Similarly, Japan employed naval force in its expansion into Korea and China, culminating in the annexation of Korea in 1910. These cases demonstrate how gunboat diplomacy often evolved into full-scale military occupation and imperial expansion (Kennedy 1988:210).

The outcomes of these historical applications of gunboat diplomacy reveal several recurring patterns. First, in the short term, coercive use of naval power was often effective in achieving strategic objectives such as opening markets, securing territory, or enforcing political compliance. Second, in the long term, such actions frequently generated resistance, nationalism, and conflict, undermining the stability of imposed arrangements. Third, the legitimacy of gunboat diplomacy has increasingly been challenged under modern international law, particularly following the establishment of the United Nations and the prohibition of the use of force except in self-defence (Keohane 1984:95).

In contemporary contexts, gunboat diplomacy has evolved into more sophisticated forms that combine military presence with economic and technological tools. The 2026 conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran reflects this transformation, where traditional naval power is integrated with cyber operations, sanctions, and strategic communication (Freeman 2026:30). Thus, while the methods have changed, the underlying logic of coercion remains consistent with historical precedents.

Comparative Case Analysis of Gunboat Diplomacy

To deepen the analysis, this section presents a structured comparison of historical cases where states employed gunboat diplomacy, examining the objectives, methods, and outcomes. This matrix highlights patterns and provides a foundation for linking historical practice to contemporary applications, including the 2026 conflict.

Table 1: Comparative Case Matrix of Gunboat Diplomacy

<i>Case</i>	<i>Actor(s)</i>	<i>Target State</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Instruments Used</i>	<i>Immediate Outcome</i>	<i>Long-term Outcome</i>
<i>Opium Wars</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>1839-1860</i>	<i>Naval bombardment, blockades</i>	Opening of Chinese ports; unequal treaties	Loss of sovereignty; rise of anti-foreign nationalism
<i>Perry Expedition</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>1853-1854</i>	<i>Naval show of force</i>	Opening of Japan (Convention of Kanagawa)	Rapid modernization; emergence as global power
<i>Roosevelt Corollary Interventions</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Dominican Republic ; Cuba ; Venezuela</i>	<i>1900s-1930s</i>	<i>Naval presence, financial control</i>	Stabilization of debts; political influence	Dependency; regional resentment
<i>Colonial Expansion in Africa</i>	<i>France; Germany</i>	<i>Various African polities</i>	<i>Late 19th century</i>	<i>Naval force, coercive treaties</i>	Establishment of colonial control	Long-term instability; post-colonial conflicts
<i>Italo-Turkish War</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Libya (Ottoman territory)</i>	<i>1911-1912</i>	<i>Naval bombardment</i>	Weakening of Ottoman control	Colonial occupation; resistance movements
<i>Japanese Expansion</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Korea, China</i>	<i>1895-1910</i>	<i>Naval and military force</i>	Territorial control; annexation of Korea	Regional tensions; legacy of conflict

Analytical Synthesis of Comparative Findings

The comparative analysis reveals several **recurring patterns** in the application and consequences of gunboat diplomacy.

Effectiveness in Achieving Immediate Objectives

Across cases, gunboat diplomacy proved highly effective in achieving short-term strategic goals. The United Kingdom successfully forced China to open its markets, while the United States compelled Japan to abandon isolationism. These outcomes support the realist argument that superior military capability can decisively shape state behaviour (Morgenthau 1948:27).

However, effectiveness depended on **asymmetry of power**. In all historical cases, the coercing state possessed overwhelming naval superiority, enabling credible threats and rapid enforcement (Schelling 1966:35).

Long-term Political and Social Consequences

While effective in the short term, gunboat diplomacy often produced adverse long-term outcomes. In China, foreign coercion contributed to internal instability and nationalist movements (Fairbank 1978:220). Similarly, U.S. interventions in Latin America generated enduring resentment and perceptions of neo-imperialism (LaFeber 1993:115).

In Africa, European coercive expansion resulted in artificial state boundaries and governance challenges that persist today (Pakenham 1991:450). These findings suggest that coercion may undermine legitimacy and create conditions for future conflict (Khan 2026:58).

Transformation into Structural Change

An important variation emerges in the case of Japan, where coercion triggered modernization and integration into the global system. Unlike China, Japan leveraged external pressure to reform its political and economic systems, eventually becoming a major power (Beasley 1995:67).

This indicates that **domestic institutional capacity** plays a critical role in shaping outcomes. States with strong governance structures are better positioned to adapt to external pressure.

Evolution of Instruments of Coercion

Historically, gunboat diplomacy relied primarily on naval force. However, over time, it has evolved to incorporate economic and technological tools. Modern coercion includes sanctions, cyber operations, and financial restrictions, reflecting increased complexity in international relations (Freedman 2013:52).

The 2026 conflict demonstrates this evolution, combining traditional military force with economic sanctions and digital warfare (Freeman 2026:30).

Implications for Contemporary Gunboat Diplomacy (2026 Context)

The historical cases provide critical insights for understanding the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict:

- **Continuity:** The use of naval and military force to compel behaviour remains consistent with historical practice.
- **Change:** Modern coercion integrates economic and technological dimensions, making it more complex.
- **Risk of Escalation:** Unlike historical asymmetrical cases, the 2026 conflict involves relatively strong actors, increasing the risk of prolonged confrontation.

- **Legitimacy Challenges:** Contemporary international law places greater constraints on the use of force, limiting the acceptability of gunboat diplomacy (Keohane 1984:101).

Concluding Observation on Comparative Analysis

The comparative evidence demonstrates that gunboat diplomacy is a **double-edged instrument**. While it can achieve immediate strategic objectives, it often generates unintended long-term consequences, including instability, resistance, and erosion of legitimacy.

In the context of the 2026 conflict, these lessons underscore the importance of balancing coercive strategies with diplomatic engagement and institutional frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives:

Realism

Realist theory posits that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and security are paramount. The actions of the United States and Israel can be interpreted as efforts to maintain regional dominance and prevent the emergence of a nuclear-capable Iran (Morgenthau 1948:25).

Coercive Diplomacy Theory

Schelling's framework emphasizes the use of limited force to achieve political objectives. The combination of military strikes and diplomatic negotiations in the 2026 conflict reflects this approach (Schelling 1966:70).

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism highlights the role of international institutions in promoting cooperation and mitigating conflict. The marginalization of institutions such as the United Nations during the conflict suggests a weakening of multilateral mechanisms (Keohane 1984:89).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the relationship between coercion, diplomacy, and outcomes:

- **Independent Variable:** Military and economic coercion (airstrikes, naval blockades, sanctions);
- **Intervening Variable:** Diplomatic engagement (negotiations, mediation, signalling);
- **Dependent Variable :** Conflict outcomes (escalation, compliance, stalemate).

The framework assumes that the effectiveness of gunboat diplomacy depends on the balance between coercive pressure and diplomatic incentives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, using a case study approach to analyse the 2026 conflict. Data is drawn from :

- Academic literature ;
- Policy reports ;
- Media coverage and official statements.

The analysis is conducted through thematic coding, focusing on patterns of coercion, diplomatic engagement, and outcomes. Content analysis is also used to examine narratives and justifications presented by key actors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Military Coercion and Strategic Signalling

The 2026 conflict demonstrates the continued reliance on military force as a tool of coercion. The coordinated airstrikes by the United States and Israel were intended to degrade Iran's military capabilities and signal resolve (Freeman 2026:31).

Naval deployments in the Persian Gulf further reinforced this message, with the potential to disrupt global energy supplies. Such actions align with traditional notions of gunboat diplomacy, where the display of force serves as a means of influencing adversaries.

Economic Sanctions and Financial Pressure

Economic sanctions played a crucial role in the conflict, targeting Iran's financial systems and limiting its ability to sustain military operations. These measures reflect the integration of economic tools into modern coercive strategies (Allison 2017:82).

However, the effectiveness of sanctions remains contested, with some scholars arguing that they disproportionately affect civilian populations while failing to achieve political objectives (Khan 2026:60).

Diplomatic Engagement and Strategic Ambiguity

Despite the intensity of military operations, diplomatic efforts continued throughout the conflict. Back-channel negotiations and mediation attempts highlight the dual nature of coercive diplomacy, combining force with dialogue (Byman and Waxman 2002:45).

Implications for International Law and Multilateralism

The conflict raises significant questions about the legality of pre-emptive strikes and naval blockades. The apparent sidelining of international institutions underscores the challenges facing multilateral governance (Keohane 1984:102).

U.S. Military Strategy: *Operation Epic Fury*

A central feature of the 2026 conflict was the United States' military campaign, code-named *Operation Epic Fury*, which represented a calibrated application of coercive force consistent with contemporary gunboat diplomacy. The operation combined *precision airstrikes*, *naval deployments*, *cyber operations*, and *economic pressure* to degrade Iran's strategic capabilities while avoiding full-scale war.

Operation Epic Fury was designed around three strategic pillars. First, *deterrence through overwhelming force projection*, demonstrated by the deployment of U.S. naval assets in the Persian Gulf and surrounding waters. This included carrier strike groups and missile defence systems aimed at ensuring maritime dominance and securing critical trade routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz. Second, *targeted degradation of military infrastructure*, achieved through coordinated strikes on missile systems, command-and-control centres, and logistical networks. Third, *strategic signalling*, whereby limited but highly visible military actions were intended to compel behavioural change without triggering uncontrollable escalation (Freeman 2026:33).

From a theoretical perspective, *Operation Epic Fury* aligns closely with Schelling's notion of coercive diplomacy, in which force is used not for outright destruction but to influence the adversary's decision-making calculus (Schelling 1966:72). The operation also reflects the integration of traditional gunboat diplomacy with modern warfare techniques, including cyber capabilities and real-time intelligence.

However, the effectiveness of the operation remains contested. While it succeeded in demonstrating U.S. military superiority and temporarily disrupting Iranian capabilities, critics argue that it contributed to regional instability and increased the risk of retaliatory escalation (Khan 2026:61). Furthermore, the operation raised significant legal and ethical questions regarding the use of pre-emptive force under international law.

Political Leadership, Strategic Narratives, and the Role of Donald J. Trump

The strategic posture of the United States during the 2026 conflict was also shaped by political leadership and the articulation of national security doctrine. Statements and policy orientations associated with Donald J. Trump—both during and after his presidency—continued to influence U.S. strategic thinking, particularly in relation to Iran.

Trump’s earlier “maximum pressure” campaign, initiated during his administration, emphasized the use of *economic sanctions, military deterrence, and unilateral action* to constrain Iran’s regional influence. This doctrine laid the groundwork for subsequent strategies, including Operation *Epic Fury*, by normalizing the use of coercive instruments as primary tools of foreign policy (Freedman 2013:58).

In public and policy discourse, Trump consistently framed Iran as a principal threat to regional and global security, advocating for decisive and, if necessary, unilateral action. His rhetoric emphasized strength, deterrence, and the willingness to use force, reinforcing the credibility of U.S. threats (Allison 2017:91). For instance, Trump’s earlier statements on Iran underscored the importance of demonstrating military superiority to compel compliance, a principle reflected in the operational design of *Epic Fury*.

From an analytical standpoint, the influence of Trump’s strategic narrative can be understood through the lens of coercive diplomacy. As Schelling argues, the effectiveness of coercion depends not only on capabilities but also on the credibility of threats and the clarity of communication (Schelling 1966:36). Trump’s approach contributed to this credibility by signalling a high tolerance for risk and a readiness to escalate if necessary.

Nevertheless, this approach also generated significant controversy. Critics contend that the emphasis on unilateralism and military coercion undermined multilateral institutions and diplomatic norms, potentially weakening the long-term effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy (Keohane 1984:110). Moreover, the personalization of foreign policy narratives around strong leadership may have contributed to strategic ambiguity, complicating efforts to de-escalate tensions.

Synthesis: Operation Epic Fury within the Framework of Gunboat Diplomacy

When situated within the broader framework of gunboat diplomacy, Operation *Epic Fury* represents a **modern hybrid model** characterized by:

- **Naval Power Projection:** Continuation of traditional gunboat diplomacy through maritime dominance;
- **Precision Warfare:** Use of advanced technologies to minimize collateral damage while maximizing strategic impact;
- **Economic Coercion:** Integration of sanctions and financial restrictions;
- **Strategic Communication:** Use of political rhetoric and signalling, influenced by leaders such as Donald J. Trump, to reinforce deterrence.

This synthesis highlights the transformation of gunboat diplomacy from a purely naval instrument into a **multi-dimensional strategy** combining military, economic, and political tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Reinforce Multilateral Institutions:** Strengthen the role of the United Nations in conflict resolution.

2. **Promote Preventive Diplomacy:** Address underlying tensions before escalation.
3. **Regulate Coercive Measures:** Develop clearer legal frameworks for sanctions and military actions.
4. **Enhance Dialogue Mechanisms:** Establish continuous communication channels.
5. **Balance Power and Diplomacy:** Avoid over-reliance on military force.

CONCLUSION

The 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates that gunboat diplomacy remains a persistent and influential instrument in contemporary international relations. While its classical form was rooted in naval intimidation and imperial expansion, its modern manifestation reflects a far more complex and hybridized approach. The integration of precision military strikes, naval deployments, economic sanctions, and cyber capabilities underscores the evolution of coercive diplomacy in the 21st century. In this regard, the conflict confirms that the fundamental logic of power projection—compelling adversaries through the threat or limited use of force—continues to shape state behaviour, particularly in regions of high strategic importance.

At the same time, the case reveals the inherent limitations of gunboat diplomacy when applied in a multipolar and interconnected global order. Unlike earlier historical examples where power asymmetry ensured rapid compliance, the 2026 conflict involved relatively capable actors, thereby increasing the risk of escalation and prolongation. Iran’s capacity to respond through asymmetric means, including missile strikes and regional proxies, highlights the diminishing effectiveness of coercion as a unilateral tool. This dynamic reinforces the argument that military superiority alone is insufficient to secure sustainable political outcomes (Freeman 2026:35).

Furthermore, the conflict raises critical questions regarding the legitimacy and legality of coercive strategies in modern international law. The use of pre-emptive strikes, naval blockades, and unilateral sanctions challenges the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and undermines the credibility of multilateral institutions. The apparent marginalization of global governance mechanisms during the crisis suggests a broader trend toward unilateralism and strategic competition, which may erode the normative foundations of the international system (Keohane 1984:112). Consequently, the continued reliance on gunboat diplomacy risks weakening the very structures designed to maintain global peace and security.

Another key insight emerging from this study is the role of political leadership and strategic narratives in shaping the application of coercive diplomacy. The influence of figures such as Donald J. Trump, particularly through doctrines emphasizing strength, deterrence, and unilateral action, illustrates how leadership perceptions can reinforce or constrain the use of force. The credibility of coercive threats often depends not only on material capabilities but also on the willingness of leaders to act decisively. However, such approaches may also contribute to strategic ambiguity and reduce opportunities for diplomatic de-escalation.

Importantly, the long-term consequences of gunboat diplomacy remain deeply problematic. Historical evidence demonstrates that while coercion may achieve immediate objectives, it often generates resentment, resistance, and instability. The 2026 conflict appears to follow a similar trajectory, with heightened regional tensions, economic disruptions, and the potential for protracted confrontation. These outcomes suggest that coercive strategies, if not carefully calibrated and complemented by diplomacy, may ultimately undermine their intended objectives.

In light of these findings, the study underscores the necessity of rebalancing international relations away from coercion and toward cooperative and rules-based approaches. While military power will remain an essential component of statecraft, its use must be guided by clear legal frameworks, multilateral engagement, and sustained diplomatic dialogue. The future of global peace and security will depend on the ability of states to reconcile power with legitimacy, ensuring that the pursuit of national interests does not come at the expense of international stability.

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