



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

## In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS In Focus: 13/2025

27 June 2025

### Operation Midnight Hammer

### 3 Questions from an Air Power Perspective

Wg Cdr A Pichipoo Raja  
Research Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



Source: Generated using Grok AI (Author Creation)



**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

**Keywords:** TLAM, Op Hammer, B-2 Bomber, Iran, Israel, US, Air Missile, Attack, Weapons

On June 21, 2025, the US conducted strikes on three nuclear facilities in Iran under the operation codename "Midnight Hammer". A total of 14 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOP), GBU 57 bombs, weighing 30,000 pounds each, were dropped from B-2 bombers that flew from the mainland US.<sup>1</sup> One hour and forty minutes before the B-2 dropped their weapons, two dozen Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) were fired from a US submarine. Consequently, Iran has admitted to severe damage to its nuclear infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> However, from an air power perspective, there are still some questions that remain unanswered.

Firstly, Israel has comparable weapons in its arsenal that can offer the same destruction as a TLAM.<sup>3</sup> So, the first question is, "*Why were TLAMs from the submarine employed when Israel is capable of doing the same damage with other weapons?*"

Secondly, Israel had declared air superiority over the region several days before the US attacked Iran.<sup>4</sup> Israel did not lose any aircraft in this operation (other than drones), implying the validity of this claim. There is no evidence that any Iranian aircraft took off during this operation.<sup>5</sup> However, General Dan Caine, during the press briefing, said, "*The U.S. employed several deception tactics, including decoys as the fourth and fifth generation aircraft pushed out in front of the strike package at high altitude and high speed, sweeping in front of the package for enemy fighters and surface to air missile.*"<sup>6</sup>

Why were fighter sweeps used<sup>7</sup> when there was no aerial opposition? So, the second question is, "*Over an area with air superiority, why such textbook tactics were employed?*"

Thirdly, B-2 is a stealth aircraft. Stealth aircraft are not supposed to be seen or detected. Decoys are meant to draw attention to themselves. *Why were B-2s sent to the Pacific as decoys?*

This article will offer three hypotheses on why the attack was planned in this manner.

### **Hypothesis 1 - It was an Ad Hoc Decision**

This was an ad hoc attack put together at short notice. It is likely that President Donald Trump changed his mind and ordered to attack. No one informed him that there was not enough time to prepare. US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, US Vice President JD Vance, and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio are all significantly younger than President Trump. The implications of this were evident in the case of the leaked Signal chat of the Houthi operation in March 2025, as it made it clear that no one in the US Security decision-making process contradicted the President, despite having personal reservations against the operation.<sup>8</sup> In this case, since time was short,

they possibly pulled out an existing plan to attack Iran's nuclear programme that had already been wargamed in the past. The plan was executed without significant modifications to adjust to the current situation, given the time constraints. This is evident from the use of submarine-launched TLAMs, the employment of sweep aircraft against zero air opposition, and other measures- all designed for a situation of initial wave against a well-defended adversary.

The ad hoc plan can also be inferred from the contradictions that arose during the press briefing. Secretary Pete Hegseth said, "*This is a plan that took months and weeks of positioning and preparation.*" In contrast, only minutes later, General Caine said, "*In just a matter of weeks, this went from strategic planning to global execution.*" While Secretary Hegseth sought to convey a long-term perspective on the decision, General Caine aimed to demonstrate the swift response of his forces.

### **Hypothesis 2 - Inter-Service Competition**

The US Navy lost three F/A-18 aircraft in its operations against the Houthis, with two of those losses occurring within a week in May 2025.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the United States Central Command (US CENTCOM) is believed to have lost 15 to 22 MQ-9 Reaper drones. The operation cost over a billion dollars but failed to achieve any visible objectives.<sup>10</sup> Losing so many assets to a non-state actor with no air force is a tremendous loss of credibility for any military.

The situation with Iran provided an opportunity for US CENTCOM to improve its image. Therefore, the use of TLAM, a low-risk option, was primarily intended to restore the Navy's reputation and convey a sense of jointness, even when tactically unnecessary. Considering that, throughout the operation, Israel had been effectively targeting these facilities.

### **Hypothesis 3 - Risk Averse Behaviour**

The US's prolonged involvement in the global war on terror has possibly degraded some conventional war-fighting capabilities, especially the mindset. The US military has been engaging weak adversaries like terrorists in uncontested airspace for decades. This has provided them with the freedom to employ any asset in whatever manner they deem fit. Low-risk options like drone strikes and stand-off attacks have become the norm. This has progressively lowered the institutional threshold for risk. To compare, during the Gulf War of 1991, the F-117 (stealth aircraft) was the only aircraft to operate over the densely air-defended areas of Iraq right from the beginning, when Iraqi air defences were still intact. Whereas, in this operation multiple fourth and fifth-generation fighter aircraft were used to protect the B-2 stealth aircraft during this operation over an area where air superiority was already established. This has significant connotations. Any future

operation against a peer adversary could be abandoned at the planning stage, as the risk appetite is low.

Finally, Secretary Hegseth claimed that the US military capabilities are "nearly unlimited." In that case, this kind of planning might be perfectly rational from their perspective, and all the above hypotheses could be incorrect. However, this defies one of the principles of war, "economy of effort." Therefore, drawing the correct lessons from the application of air power in this operation needs to be congruent with the principles of war.

## NOTES:

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine Hold a Press Conference," June 22, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4222543/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen/>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> "Iran says nuclear facilities 'badly damaged' by US strikes," *The Straits Times*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-nuclear-facilities-badly-damaged-by-us-strikes>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> United States Navy, "Tomahawk Cruise Missile contains 1000 lb warhead," <https://www.navy.mil/Resources/Fact-Files/Display-FactFiles/Article/2169229/tomahawk-cruise-missile>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> "Israel claims aerial superiority over Tehran as Iran launches more missiles," *NBC News*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/middle-east/live-blog/israel-iran-live-updates-new-attacks-conflict-enters-fourth-day-rcna213182>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, n. 1

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Sweeps are missions to draw out enemy aircraft and destroy them in the air. Doctrine of the Indian Air Force IAP 2000–22, P 48, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/Resources/pdf/header/latest-Doctrine-22-Feb.pdf>. Accessed on June 25, 2025. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Troy Mathews, "The Atlantic Releases Full Leaked Signal Message Thread," *Meidas Touch Network*, March 26, 2025, <https://meidasnews.com/news/read-here-the-atlantic-releases-full-leaked-signal-message-thread>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Kai Greet, "USS Harry S. Truman Loses Third F/A-18 Super Hornet," *The Aviationist*, May 07, 2025, <https://theaviationist.com/2025/05/07/third-super-hornet-lost-truman/>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Girish Luthra, "The US Offensive Against the Houthis Delivered Limited Results," *Observer Research Foundation*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-us-offensive-against-the-houthis-delivered-limited-results>. Accessed on June 25, 2025.