

Israel needs a “Doolittle raid”

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 30.11.2023

On April 18, 1942, sixteen US B-25 bombers attacked Tokyo. Of those, two were shot down. The rest reached Chinese regions where anti-Imperial forces saved them. Only one of the original 16 landed, in Vladivostok in Russia. All the rest – precious assets for a US army stretched thinner than onion-skin – were shot down or ditched. The surviving crews, all of whom had been handpicked as the best of the best, were gone, captured, or unavailable for months. Eight among the crews were captured by the Japanese.

The result of the raid: marginal damage to Tokyo, and negligible damage to the industrial capacity of its empire. Every measure of tactics held this as an irresponsible waste of men and materiel at a time when America could ill afford to waste anything. And President Roosevelt – whose attentions and energy already were stretched to the limit – sought the raid, monitored its preparations, and then ordered the raid with impatience. His general staff all thought him mentally unwell and irresponsible.

And yet, the Doolittle raid (as it came to be called after its commander, James Doolittle) was one of the most important actions undertaken by the Americans and arguably represented the war’s turning point. It was tactically disastrous and useless, but strategically cataclysmic.

Because it turned around American morale. It overshadowed – even erased – the growing wallowing in misery of the memory of December 7 and replaced it with a defined goal of the war through actions, not just words. Americans understood where they were headed and invested their energies now totally into victory rather sap their energy focused on their wounds. America had passed from fear and foreboding to becoming societally optimistic.

Japanese were unnerved because the impenetrable Islands – the islands which for 1500 years had never been penetrated because of the protective, mystical spirit of the Kamikaze wind – were penetrated and bombed. The Japanese general staff were humiliated, and their stature which rode so high in the five months since Pearl Harbor was tarnished. The killing of Japanese civilians in their capital, combined with the shame felt by the military command, created inescapable

pressure to strike back in retribution. For Japan had understood that the raid had broken their full control of the situation, taken back some of the initiative and thus threatened to reverse its relentless strategic momentum.

The pressure took its toll: Japan advanced Admiral Yamamoto's invasion plans of Hawaii to retake the initiative and force a battle in Midway for which it had not fully prepared. In June 1942, only 7 months after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were catastrophically defeated there by a far smaller force because Japan had prematurely rushed to avenge its honor. Its controlled competence had given way to a grave misstep. While it still took another three years, Midway changed the direction of the war. Japan's strategic momentum was never regained, and America was on the straight road to victory, which greatly relieved Britain and cast a dark doubt over Hitler's aspirations in Europe. Thus, those sixteen planes with few bombs set the course of the whole war.

What does this have to do with Israel?

Israel faced its Pearl Harbor on October 7. The wound had given the Iranian camp great strategic initiative and shown the region that it was the strong horse, while Israel was complacent and possibly even too weak to survive in the long term. What followed was very much like the five-month period between December 7, 1941 and April 18, 1942 in World War II, where tactically the US might have begun to mobilize, societally it began to do what it had to do, but overall the strategic momentum had not been retaken. American morale was still sinking after the initial anger faded into the grim reality of a long war, and Japanese morale continued to rise as it withered America's.

Right now, Israel has considerable tactical initiative, but no strategic initiative. Hamas dictates the fate of the hostages and deals. Hamas governs the agenda of international pressures. The US state department controls the international diplomatic agenda. Hizballah defines the parameters of conflict on the Lebanese border. Yemen chooses when, where and how often it intervenes and caused international shipping to retreat into a defense crouch. Iraqi militias define how much the US and Israel can feel secure in Syria and on the Golan. Israel may possess tactical superiority in every theater, but it lacks strategic initiative and control in all of them. Iran is still driving everything.

As such, as a nation and society, Israel will remain high but there are signs

already now of fraying of focus, internal stresses, and lack of faith in the final goals. Or even their definition. Rhetoric is also misaligned: Iran is seen and blamed as the puppet master in terms of an “either we or they survive” showdown, but the war is fought entirely locally against Hamas as if it is a limited conflict rather than part of such a twilight struggle against Iran.

Wars are won through strategy, not tactics. Israel has reached that point where it needs a Doolittle raid.

Israel not only needs to prop up Israeli moral to move beyond the shadow of October 7 (as the US had to move beyond the shadow of December 7), but to take actions that strategically signal this is about Iran. Perhaps action Iran regime itself but certainly against theaters right now languishing (Yemen, Iraq, Syria). Israel must take the strategic initiative and set the regional agenda to bear down on Tehran. Israel needs to take control of the agenda in every aspect and force Iran’s hand into missteps. Israel needs a Doolittle raid, or several such raids.

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