

Policy Brief

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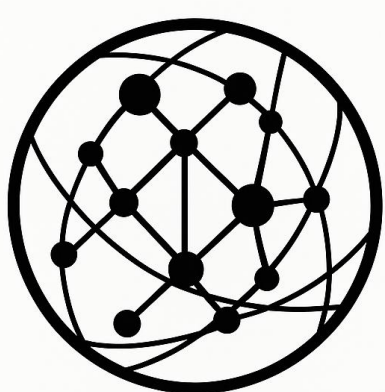
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Recommended Citation:

Wu, Shaoyuan (2026), *If the United States Suddenly Withdraws: Systemic Shock, Proxy Amplification, and Strategic Realignment in the Middle East Conflict*, Policy Brief No. EPINOVA-2026-PB-21, Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19375572>.

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If the United States Suddenly Withdraws:

Systemic Shock, Proxy Amplification, and Strategic Realignment in the Middle East Conflict

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Date: April 01, 2026

Key Judgments

- A sudden U.S. withdrawal would generate an immediate systemic shock, removing the primary escalation-regulating actor and destabilizing the existing control architecture.
- This shock would activate proxy amplification dynamics, expanding conflict across geographically embedded and semi-autonomous actors.
- As escalation pressure diffuses, the conflict would transition from centralized control to distributed network dynamics, increasing volatility and reducing controllability.
- Israel's strategic environment would shift from capability dominance to constraint accumulation, heightening risks of multi-front pressure and domestic political instability.
- Non-Western actors would expand influence through modular, non-hegemonic strategies, accelerating fragmentation without producing a clear systemic replacement.
- Cross-theater spillover effects would emerge, affecting NATO cohesion, Ukraine dynamics, and Indo-Pacific perceptions of U.S. strategic credibility.
- The United States would face a domestic political reckoning, feeding back into future strategic constraints and raising the threshold for intervention.

Executive Summary

A sudden U.S. withdrawal from the ongoing Middle East conflict would not terminate hostilities but instead initiate a structural transformation of the conflict system. Rather than producing de-escalation, withdrawal would trigger a systemic shock by removing the primary mechanism of escalation regulation, thereby redistributing pressure across actors and domains. This shock would activate a second-order process of proxy amplification, in which geographically embedded armed groups expand operational activity under reduced constraint, transforming the conflict into a distributed and persistent network. Over time, these dynamics would consolidate into a broader phase of strategic realignment, characterized not by hegemonic replacement but by pluralized influence structures, alliance fragmentation, and increased uncertainty in global security commitments.

Crucially, the consequences of withdrawal would not remain external. Within the United States, the decision would generate a domestic political reckoning that feeds back into future strategic behavior, raising the threshold for intervention while simultaneously constraining flexibility. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that withdrawal functions not as an endpoint, but as a systemic inflection point with enduring implications for both regional order and global power perception.

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1. Analytical Framework: Withdrawal as a Systemic Trigger

This analysis proceeds from a counterfactual premise: U.S. withdrawal is treated not as a conclusion to conflict, but as a structural trigger that reconfigures the system within which conflict unfolds. The central analytical claim is that withdrawal initiates a systemic transformation conceptualized as the Shock–Amplification–Realignment (SAR) framework—a three-stage escalation process through which systemic shock, proxy-driven amplification, and strategic realignment may unfold.

Importantly, the SAR process is not strictly linear nor guaranteed; its progression depends on threshold conditions, particularly the system’s proximity to the Loss-of-Control Threshold (LoCT).

This framework shifts the analytical focus away from discrete actors and events toward structural dynamics. Under this approach, the key question is not who escalates, but how the system processes and redistributes escalation pressure once its primary regulatory node is removed. Withdrawal, therefore, should be understood less as a policy decision and more as a structural intervention that alters the rules governing interaction across the conflict environment.

1.1 Analytical Extension: MCCM-Based Cost–Shock Integration

To operationalize the systemic transformation framework, this study incorporates the Middle East Conflict Cost Monitor (MCCM) as a quantitative reference structure for modeling escalation dynamics.

Within MCCM, conflict is conceptualized as a dynamic cost-distribution system composed of three interrelated dimensions: **Direct War Cost (DWC)**, referring to immediate military expenditure and operational losses; **Global Shock Cost (GSC)**, capturing systemic spillover effects including energy disruption, trade instability, and financial volatility; and **Combined Exposure (CE)**, a heuristic aggregation representing total systemic burden.

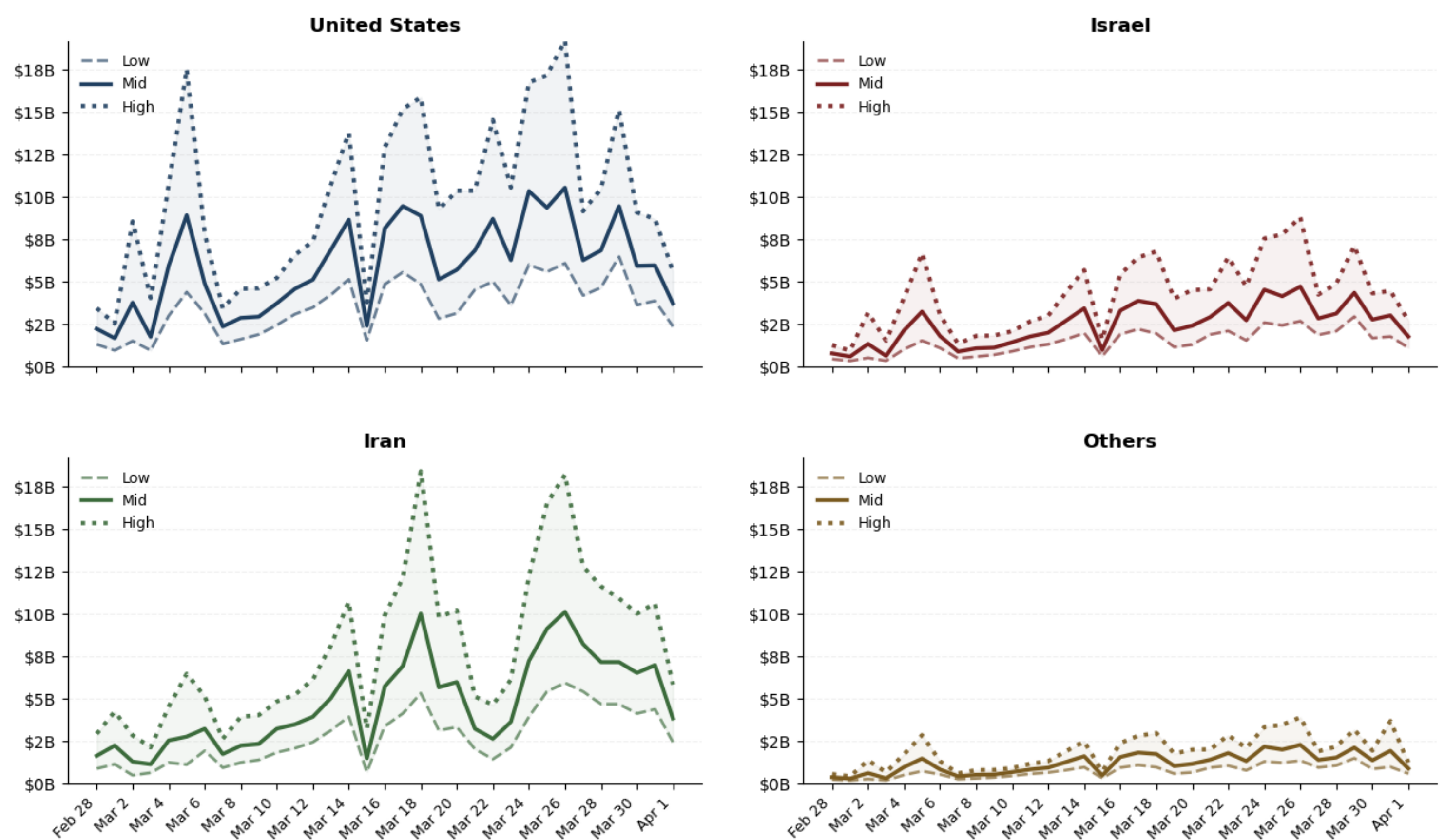
Within this framework, U.S. withdrawal does not reduce total system cost but redistributes cost across actors and domains, producing a structural transition from cost concentration (U.S.-centered burden) to cost diffusion (network-distributed burden).

Analytically, this study LoCT, previously developed as a systemic model of escalation in networked conflict, as a boundary condition for escalation dynamics. Within the present framework, LoCT functions as a systemic tipping point at which cost diffusion, signaling fragmentation, and the proliferation of semi-autonomous actors jointly exceed the system’s regulatory capacity, producing nonlinear and self-reinforcing escalation.

Empirically, approaching LoCT may be indicated by accelerated cost dispersion, increasing frequency of decentralized engagements, and the breakdown of coherent signaling across actors.

Rather than redefining LoCT, this analysis situates it within the MCCM-integrated structure, where it serves as the critical transition point linking systemic shock, proxy amplification, and strategic realignment.

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Figure 1. 2026 Middle East Conflict Cost Monitor (MCCM): Daily Direct War Cost by Actor — Low / Mid / High (Feb 28–Apr 1, 2026)

Note: United States, Israel, and Others are disaggregated from the U.S. & Allies bloc using phase-based allocation shares. Day 32–33 values are anchored to updated country-level MCCM estimates following recalibration. Global shock components are excluded; figures represent direct war cost only and should not be interpreted as total systemic burden.

While Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of daily direct war costs across actors, it does not by itself capture the underlying strategic dynamic of cost accumulation.

To understand how repeated exchanges translate into systemic pressure, it is necessary to examine cumulative cost trajectories and their divergence over time.

More importantly, this evolution reflects a structural shift from centralized cost concentration to network-distributed pressure accumulation, approaching a systemic tipping point.

In this context, the transition can be understood as a change in cost distribution patterns—from concentrated burden on a central actor to distributed accumulation across networked nodes—accompanied by increasing escalation volatility.

Figure 2 visualizes this transition and its relationship to LoCT.

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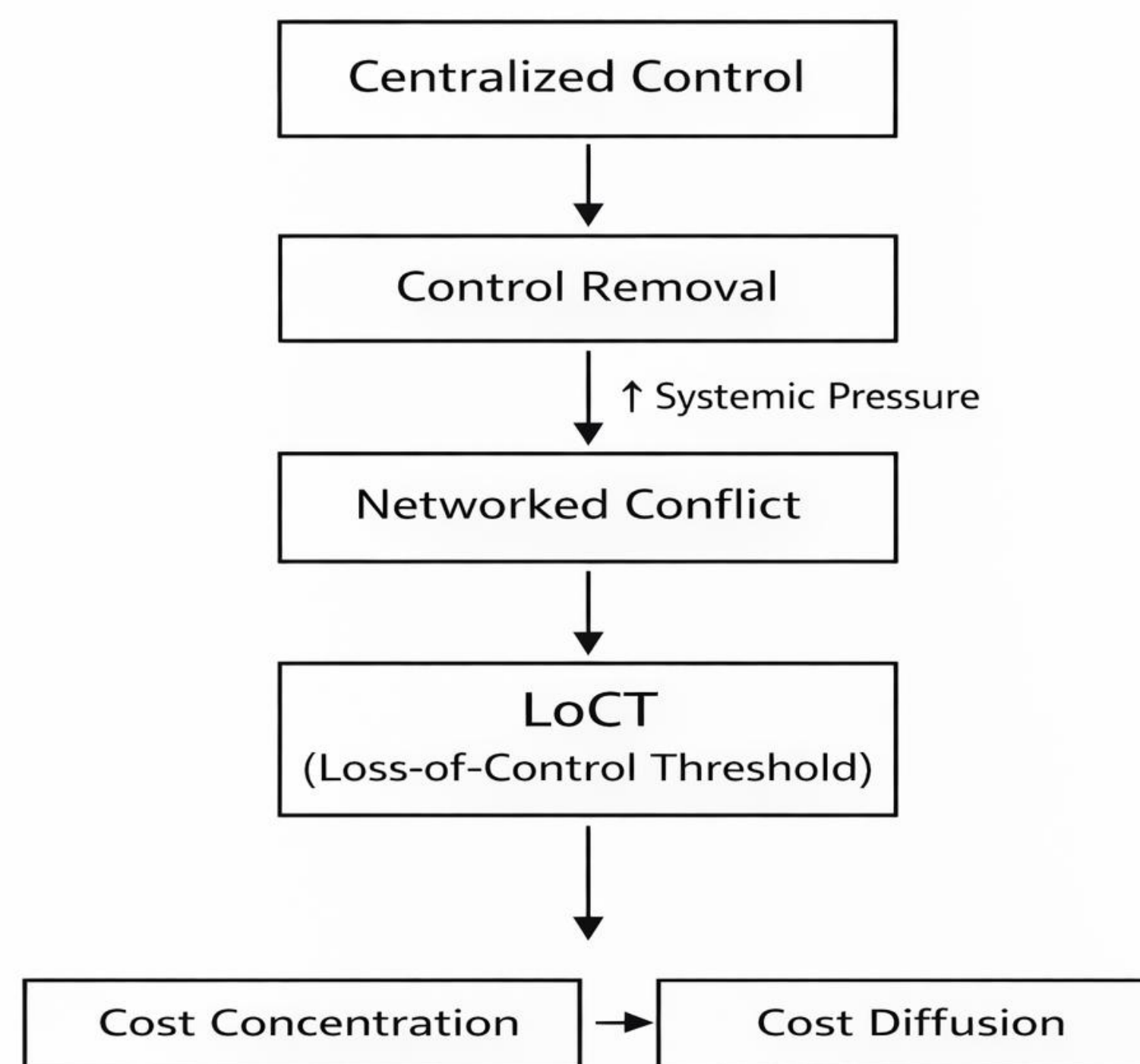


Figure 2. Centralized-to-Networked Transition and the Loss-of-Control Threshold (LoCT)

2. Systemic Shock: The Collapse of Escalation Regulation

Under conditions of active U.S. involvement, the conflict operates within a semi-regulated escalation architecture in which deterrence signaling, alliance coordination, and forward deployment function as mechanisms of escalation control. Together, these mechanisms impose constraints that limit the speed and scope of escalation, shaping its boundaries without eliminating its occurrence and preserving a degree of systemic predictability.

A sudden withdrawal removes this regulatory layer. The resulting shock is not defined by immediate battlefield change, but by the collapse of escalation management capacity. Signaling becomes fragmented, expectations diverge, and uncertainty increases across all actors. In this environment, escalation is no longer bounded by shared assumptions about thresholds or responses. Instead, it becomes open-ended and path-dependent.

Importantly, systemic shock does not predetermine outcomes. Rather, it raises volatility and expands the range of possible trajectories. Israel loses a critical buffer that previously mitigated multi-front exposure, while Iran faces a redistribution rather than a reduction of pressure. Regional actors, in turn, recalibrate their behavior under conditions of increased uncertainty. The system, as a whole, transitions from controlled interaction to unstable adaptation.

From an MCCM perspective, this phase corresponds to a transition from direct war cost concentration to increasing global shock cost and indirect systemic exposure, indicating that escalation is no longer contained within operational domains but diffuses across the broader system.

3. Proxy Amplification: Distributed Escalation Dynamics

The immediate effect of systemic shock is not centralized escalation, but its diffusion. As constraints weaken, escalation pressure is redistributed outward to actors operating on the geographic and political periphery of the conflict system. These actors embedded within local contexts yet connected to broader strategic alignments become primary drivers of sustained activity.

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This dynamic can be conceptualized as a “tail-whip effect”—a form of peripheral amplification—in which actors generate disproportionate systemic impact relative to their individual capabilities. Groups such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and various militias in Iraq and Syria are not merely extensions of state policy, but semi-autonomous nodes within a larger network. Under reduced central constraint, their operational space expands, producing multi-directional and persistent pressure across the system.

The result is a transformation of the conflict structure itself. What was previously a partially coordinated confrontation becomes a distributed network of interactions characterized by fragmentation, persistence, and resistance to centralized control. Escalation is no longer a discrete event but an ongoing condition embedded within the system.

4. Israel Under Constraint: From Dominance to Compression

In this transformed environment, Israel’s position shifts in a fundamental way. While its military capabilities remain substantial, its strategic freedom becomes increasingly constrained. The accumulation of pressures—simultaneous operational demands across multiple fronts, reduced external support, heightened international scrutiny, and intensified information exposure—produces a condition of strategic compression.

This condition forces a structural dilemma. Continued escalation may preserve deterrence in the short term but accelerates the accumulation of systemic costs. Conversely, restraint may limit immediate exposure but risks signaling weakness in a highly volatile environment. Neither option restores the prior equilibrium.

Over time, sustained compression increases the likelihood of domestic political instability. Leadership legitimacy becomes tied not only to security outcomes but to the ability to manage systemic constraints. As these constraints intensify, the margin for policy coherence narrows, raising the probability of internal fragmentation and political turnover.

5. Strategic Realignment: Fragmentation Without Replacement

As proxy-driven dynamics stabilize into persistent patterns, the system enters a phase of strategic realignment. This phase is not characterized by the emergence of a new dominant power, but by the fragmentation and reconfiguration of influence.

External actors expand their presence through differentiated strategies. China’s engagement is likely to emphasize economic and infrastructural integration, while Russia may pursue selective security and political positioning. Regional actors, rather than aligning exclusively with a single power, adopt multi-vector strategies that maximize flexibility under uncertainty.

U.S. influence is not replaced but structurally diffused across a multi-actor system characterized by partial alignment. This transition reduces system-level coherence and elevates coordination complexity across security, economic, and political domains.

6. Alliance Spillover and Cross-Theater Effects

The consequences of withdrawal extend beyond the Middle East. Because alliance systems operate through shared expectations rather than formal commitments alone, changes in one theater reverberate across others.

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In Europe, U.S. withdrawal would intensify concerns regarding the durability of American commitments, particularly in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Within NATO, divergent threat perceptions and burden-sharing expectations would likely become more pronounced. In the Indo-Pacific, partners may reassess the credibility of U.S. multi-theater engagement capacity.

These effects are not driven by material shifts alone, but by perception chains that link regional actions to global expectations. As these perceptions evolve, alliance cohesion becomes more difficult to sustain, and strategic coordination becomes more uncertain.

7. Domestic Political Reckoning and Strategic Feedback

The external consequences of withdrawal are mirrored by internal political dynamics within the United States. Withdrawal redistributes responsibility across political institutions, generating a process of accountability that extends beyond immediate decision-making.

Debates are likely to center on the rationale for entering the conflict, the justification for withdrawal, and the relationship between costs incurred and outcomes achieved. Competing narratives will emerge, framing withdrawal either as strategic restraint or as evidence of failure. The dominance of one narrative over the other will shape the institutional response, including congressional oversight, policy constraints, and public tolerance for future interventions.

This process produces a feedback effect on strategy itself. As political costs become more salient, the threshold for future military engagement rises, while flexibility in crisis response declines. Withdrawal, in this sense, constrains not only current policy but the range of feasible options in future conflicts.

8. Information Dynamics: From Control to Exposure

In parallel with these structural shifts, the information environment undergoes its own transformation. Under conditions of coordinated engagement, narrative framing can be partially managed through alignment among key actors. Withdrawal weakens this coordination, allowing event-driven amplification to dominate.

In such an environment, high-visibility incidents—whether military or symbolic—generate rapid and often disproportionate effects on perception. Information asymmetries widen, and the gap between operational reality and perceived reality becomes more difficult to manage. The system transitions from one in which information is shaped to one in which actors are exposed to its volatility.

This shift further complicates decision-making, as perception-driven pressures feed back into both political and military domains.

Conclusion

The central implication is that withdrawal does not reduce systemic risk but redistributes and amplifies it.

Rather than closing a conflict cycle, it opens a new phase characterized by decentralized escalation, reduced controllability, and heightened global spillover.

In this sense, withdrawal should be understood not as an exit, but as a transition into a more complex and less governable conflict system.

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Final Analytical Statement

If the United States withdraws, the conflict will not de-escalate but transition into a systemic expansion phase in which shock-induced instability, proxy-driven amplification, and multi-layered strategic realignment reshape both regional dynamics and global power perception.