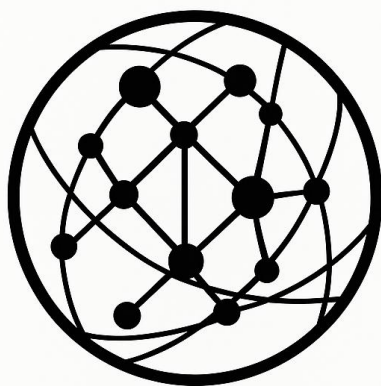


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From Separate Wars to Linked Battlefields:
The Emerging Risk of Continentalized Conflict

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Key Judgments

- **Regional conflicts are becoming functionally connected without merging into a single war.** The Russia–Ukraine war, the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict, Red Sea confrontation, and Caspian insecurity remain distinct in their actors, objectives, command structures, legal settings, and termination pathways.
- **Cross-theater coupling is no longer merely prospective.** Ukrainian air-defense specialists have entered Gulf and Jordanian air-defense networks; Iran has claimed to have struck a purported Ukrainian facility in Dubai; Iran has accused Ukraine of attacking an Iranian commercial vessel, while Ukraine has acknowledged operations against Russian vessels allegedly carrying Iran-linked military cargo in the Caspian; Tehran has stated that the attack on the Iranian vessel could not go unanswered; and Zelenskiy has argued that Iran’s earlier transfers of drones, weapons, military technology, and production licenses to Russia amounted to participation in the war against Ukraine, while also warning against opening an additional front.
- **Selected European support infrastructure is entering the Middle Eastern conflict’s threat environment.** Existing U.S. access arrangements in Britain and a temporary U.S. tanker deployment in Bulgaria have led Iran to warn that enabling states or facilities could become what it described as legitimate targets.
- **The conflicts remain below partial battlefield integration.** There is no demonstrated unified command, common war aim, integrated targeting system, or publicly established Russia–Iran operational mechanism linking the theaters.
- **The present condition is best described as advanced cross-theater coupling with an emerging reciprocal escalation pathway.** A Black Sea–Caspian–Persian Gulf–Red Sea–European support-node system may be emerging, but it is a network of functional connections rather than a continuous front.
- The threshold toward partial battlefield integration would narrow further if repeated Iranian strikes targeted Ukrainian or European support nodes, Ukraine sustained attacks on Iranian interests, Russia openly supported Iranian retaliation, or U.S. and allied planning integrated allocation, protection, and targeting across the two theaters.

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Executive Summary

The contemporary security environment is increasingly defined by conflicts that remain politically separate but are becoming functionally connected. The clearest initial mechanism was Ukraine's involvement in Middle Eastern air defense. In March 2026, Ukraine deployed drone-interception and air-defense specialists to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan. Reuters reported that 228 Ukrainian specialists had been deployed, transferring personnel and wartime experience from the Russia–Ukraine theater into Gulf and Jordanian air-defense networks (Reuters, 2026k, 2026l).

Iran subsequently claimed that it had struck a Ukrainian anti-drone facility in Dubai where Ukrainian personnel were allegedly present. Ukraine denied the claim, and the reported effects and casualties remain unverified (Agence France-Presse, 2026; Ukrainska Pravda, 2026). The allegation does not establish Ukrainian losses, but it shows that Iran publicly incorporated Ukrainian personnel and systems into its conception of the opposing operational network.

The pattern subsequently appeared to extend into the Caspian. On July 25, Iran accused Ukraine of attacking an Iranian commercial vessel. Zelenskiy separately confirmed Ukrainian strikes on Russian vessels alleged to have transported Iran-linked military cargo. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi then stated that the attack on the Iranian vessel could not go unanswered (Reuters, 2026d, 2026e).

A parallel pathway is developing through European support infrastructure. Britain has maintained existing U.S. access arrangements at selected airfields, while Bulgaria approved a temporary deployment of up to eight U.S. KC-135 tanker aircraft and approximately 250 personnel. Iran interpreted these arrangements as potentially enabling U.S. operations and warned that supporting states could become what it described as legitimate targets (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b, 2026j).

This brief defines continentalization as a higher-order process in which geographically separated conflicts become persistently interdependent through operations, personnel, technology, bases, logistics, maritime corridors, intelligence, industrial capacity, third-party nodes, and shared resource constraints. The conflicts have not reached that condition. They remain below partial battlefield integration, but advanced cross-theater coupling is narrowing the threshold.

Why This Matters

Regional analysis remains necessary but is no longer sufficient. Personnel, operational knowledge, air-defense assets, tanker aircraft, bases, logistics corridors, maritime routes, and third-party states can connect conflicts without aligning their political objectives or command structures.

The policy problem is not that the Russia–Ukraine and U.S.–Israel–Iran conflicts have already become one war. It is that the systems sustaining them are becoming less separable. Escalation can move through personnel deployments, support infrastructure, maritime incidents, threat designation, and competition for shared resources without any major power deliberately choosing to create a unified conflict.

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Analytical Note

This brief distinguishes four levels of interaction: conflict expansion, cross-theater coupling, partial battlefield integration, and continentalization. They range from geographic widening to persistent, multidimensional, and geographically extensive interdependence.

Movement across these levels is assessed through repeated cross-theater effects, competition for shared resources, sustained third-party node participation, and common systemic consequences across logistics, energy, shipping, industry, information, and basing systems.

The analysis draws on public reporting available through July 27, 2026, 12:00 ET, and prior EPINOVA research. Confirmed deployments and access arrangements are separated from conflict-party claims, while uncorroborated strike effects, casualties, cargoes, targeting rationales, and retaliatory intentions are not treated as established facts.

1. Separate Wars, Shared Enabling Systems

The Russia–Ukraine war remains a European security conflict; the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation remains centered on the Middle East; Red Sea instability retains a maritime dimension; and the Caspian remains an energy and transport corridor. These distinctions remain analytically necessary.

What is changing is the separability of the systems that sustain them. In March 2026, Ukraine sent air-defense and drone-interception teams to Gulf states and Jordan. Zelenskiy stated that 228 specialists had been deployed and described their role as technical and defensive rather than participation in war against Iran (Reuters, 2026k, 2026l).

The deployments created two established forms of coupling. The first was technological: Ukrainian counter-drone methods entered Gulf and Jordanian air-defense networks. The second was operational: Ukrainian personnel became temporarily embedded in regional air-defense activity.

A third pathway remains contested. Iran claimed on March 28 that it had struck a purported Ukrainian anti-drone facility in Dubai where Ukrainian personnel were allegedly present. Ukraine denied the claim, and the reported effects remain unverified (Agence France-Presse, 2026; Ukrainska Pravda, 2026). Even so, the allegation demonstrates that Iran publicly framed Ukrainian personnel and equipment as part of an opposing network.

The central question is therefore no longer whether coupling exists, but whether it will become repetitive, reciprocal, and materially important enough to produce partial battlefield integration. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that interdependent systems transmit disruption across domains and allow control over critical hubs to generate both vulnerability and coercive leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Helbing, 2013; Rinaldi et al., 2001).

2. The Caspian as an Emerging Cross-Theater Interface

Iran’s allegation of a Ukrainian attack on an Iranian commercial vessel may indicate a further extension of cross-theater interaction into the Caspian. On July 25, Iran accused Ukraine of carrying out the attack, reportedly killing one sailor and injuring another. Zelenskiy separately confirmed Ukrainian strikes on Russian vessels alleged to have transported Iran-linked military cargo. The relationship between these operations and the wider logistical context remains unclear (Reuters, 2026e).

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The incident gained greater escalation significance on July 26, when Araqchi stated that the attack could not go unanswered. Although he did not specify the form, location, timing, or target of any response, the statement moved the episode from a disputed maritime incident into Iran’s public retaliatory signaling (Reuters, 2026d). Zelenskiy subsequently argued that Iran’s earlier transfers of drones, weapons, military technology, and production licenses to Russia amounted to participation in the war against Ukraine, while also emphasizing the need to avoid opening an additional front (Kyiv Post, 2026). Together, these statements indicate an emerging reciprocal attribution dynamic in which both sides increasingly interpret support and operations in one theater as grounds for potential action in another.

As **Figure 1** shows, the relevant sequence links Ukrainian defensive involvement in the Middle East, an alleged Iranian strike on a purported Ukrainian facility in the Gulf, reported Ukrainian operations in the Caspian, and an Iranian statement that a response was necessary (Agence France-Presse, 2026; Reuters, 2026d, 2026e, 2026k, 2026l; Ukrainska Pravda, 2026).



Figure 1. Emerging Reciprocal Escalation Pathway

Note: The arrows indicate a developing escalation pathway, not verified operational sequencing, centralized coordination, or territorial continuity.

Sources: Compiled by the author from Agence France-Presse (2026), Reuters (2026d, 2026e, 2026k, 2026l), and Ukrainska Pravda (2026).

A durable Caspian linkage would require repetition. Relevant indicators include further attacks on vessels or ports, organized escort activity, sustained military surveillance, shipping-behavior changes, expanded air-defense deployments, or direct Iranian action against Ukrainian interests.

The Caspian matters because it links Russia, Iran, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and north–south trade routes. Its value does not depend on proving a formal Russia–Iran military supply architecture. Even under constraint, it can preserve commercial continuity, sustain selected logistical flows, and provide route redundancy (Wu, 2026e).

Disruption can therefore generate strategic effects without closing the corridor. Insurance costs, inspections, escort requirements, port delays, and route uncertainty can reduce throughput and reliability. Previous analysis describes this as a shift from asset destruction toward system degradation, in which localized disruption raises coordination friction and weakens overall network performance (Wu, 2026a).

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The Caspian should therefore be treated as a developing strategic interface rather than an established battlefield.

3. From Parallel Transmission Pathways to Reciprocal Escalation

The emerging system is better represented through parallel pathways than through a single chain. As Figure 2 shows, the eastern pathway runs from Ukraine and the Black Sea through the Caspian to Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf–Red Sea space. The European support pathway links selected British and Bulgarian facilities to U.S. bomber, tanker, logistics, and access arrangements, Middle Eastern operations or readiness, and Iranian threat designation of selected European nodes.

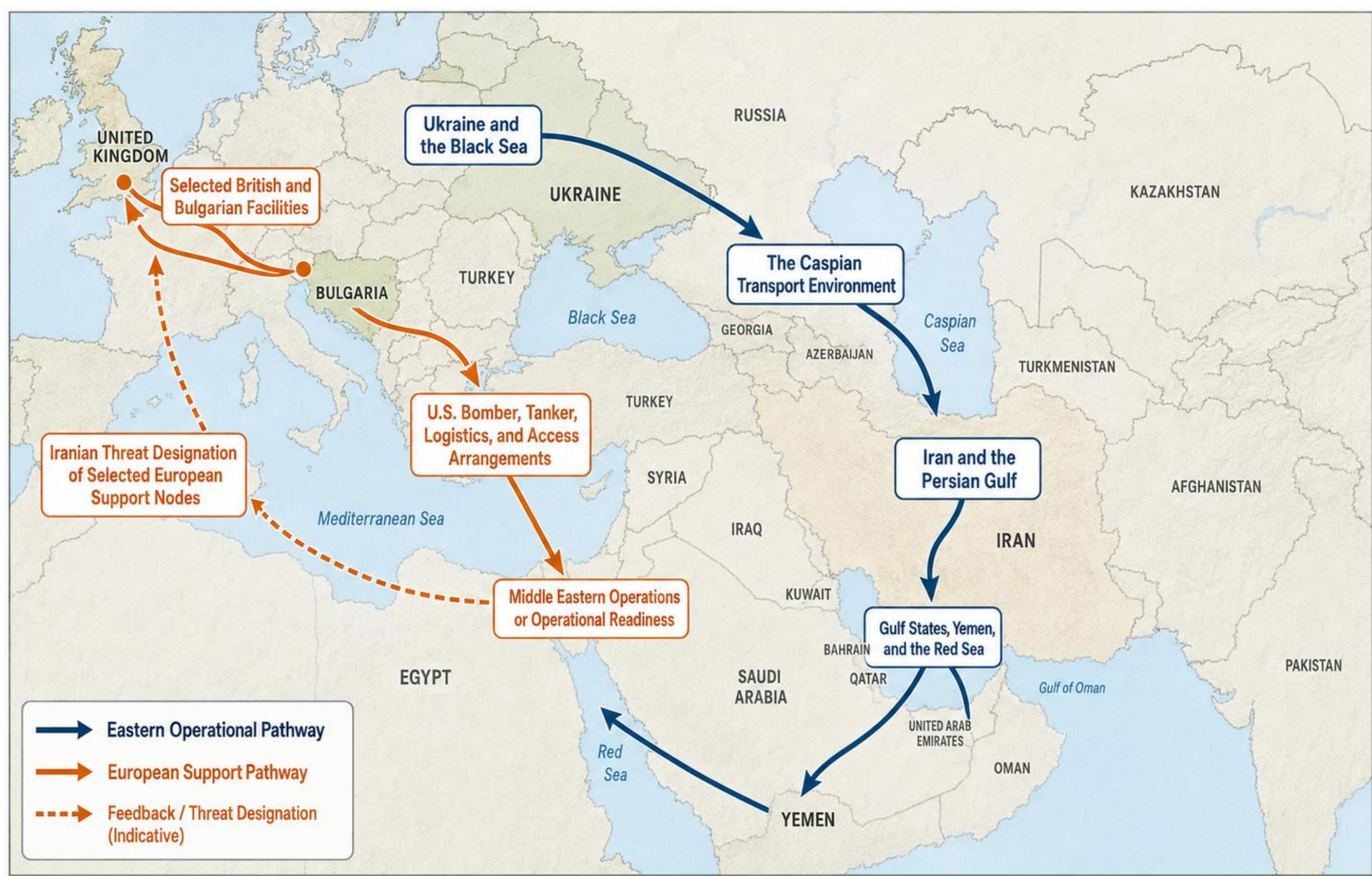


Figure 2. Cross-Theater Pathways of Escalation

Note: The arrows indicate analytical pathways of transmission, not territorial continuity, fixed sequencing, alliance cohesion, centralized coordination, or verified operational control.

Sources: Compiled by the author from Reuters reporting cited in this brief, including Reuters Reuters (2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e, 2026g, 2026i, 2026j, 2026k, 2026l, 2026m).

These pathways also generate shared effects across Suez and Mediterranean shipping, European force protection, energy markets, insurance, industrial capacity, and Europe–Asia trade. No actor controls the full system, and no common political objective unites its participants.

Four transmission mechanisms are visible:

- Ukrainian personnel and operational methods have entered Gulf and Jordanian air-defense networks.
- Iranian targeting claims have placed Ukrainian personnel within the regional threat environment.

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- Reported Ukrainian operations in the Caspian have affected an Iranian vessel and Russian vessels allegedly carrying Iran-linked military cargo.
- British access arrangements and the potentially enabling role of the Bulgarian tanker deployment have brought selected European rear-area nodes into Iranian threat calculations.

Together, these mechanisms create the possibility of escalation by substitution: pressure imposed in one theater may be answered against personnel, infrastructure, partners, or support networks in another. This does not require unified command or common war aims.

Maritime insecurity further connects the Caspian, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Suez, and Mediterranean through commercial risk, escort requirements, and route substitution. Gulf disruption affects energy prices and may increase the strategic value of alternative corridors (Reuters, 2026g). Military systems, dual-use components, intelligence assets, tanker aircraft, and technical expertise must likewise be distributed across several theaters.

The result is more than geographic proximity but less than a unified battlefield: a network of reciprocal exposure in which local deployments, strikes, access decisions, and retaliatory signals can alter capabilities and incentives elsewhere.

4. European Support Nodes and the Expansion of Targeting Logic

Britain and Bulgaria illustrate how European facilities can become operationally relevant to a Middle Eastern conflict without the states themselves formally entering the war.

Britain has maintained existing arrangements allowing U.S. aircraft to use selected British airfields. The IRGC warned that Britain could become what it described as a definite and legitimate target if it supported U.S. military action against Iran. The warning followed an IRGC allegation that U.S. bombing missions had operated from RAF Fairford, alongside British confirmation that existing access arrangements would continue. The authorization and role of individual missions remain separate questions (Reuters, 2026a, 2026j).

Bulgaria approved the temporary stationing of up to eight U.S. KC-135 tanker aircraft and approximately 250 personnel at Bezmer Air Base from July 24 to October 1. Iran warned Sofia against enabling U.S. operations, while Bulgarian officials described the deployment as defensive and limited. Britain is therefore the more clearly documented access case; Bulgaria is a potentially enabling support-node case whose actual operational role remains less certain (Reuters, 2026b).

These cases do not establish that Britain or Bulgaria has become a party to the armed conflict. Their significance lies in the expansion of targeting logic: European infrastructure is being linked to operational effects in the Middle East and entering Iranian calculations of responsibility and possible retaliation.

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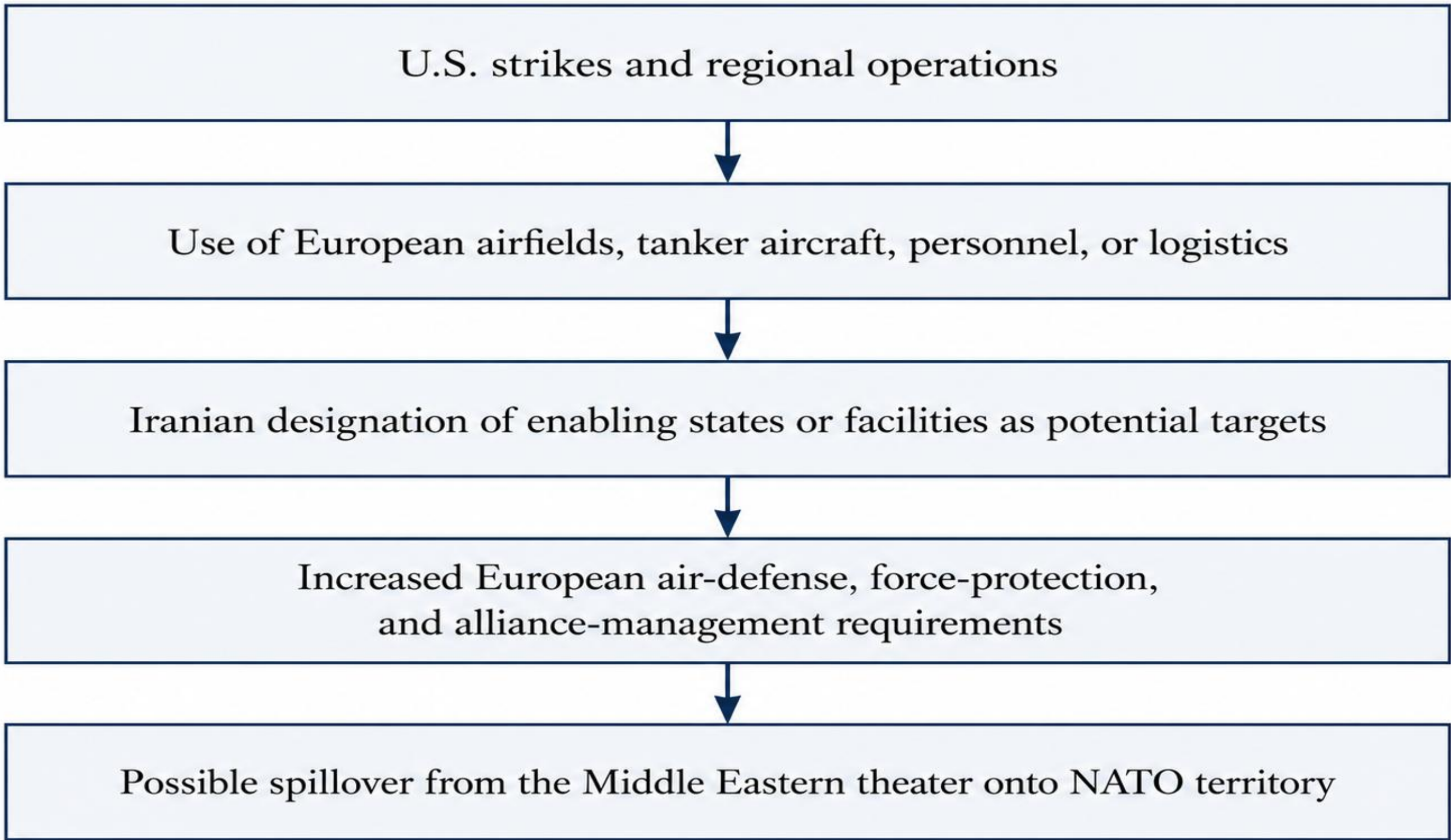


Figure 3. European Support Nodes and Potential Spillover Pathway

Note: The arrows indicate a potential pathway of escalation, not verified operational sequencing, centralized coordination, territorial continuity, or any automatic legal or military consequence.

Sources: Compiled by the author from Reuters (2026a, 2026b, 2026j).

A transition from warning to attack would mark a major threshold event. A strike on British or Bulgarian territory would likely compel NATO consultation. Whether it constituted an Article 5 armed attack, and what assistance followed, would depend on attribution, operational context, damage, and political judgment; collective military action would not be automatic.

5. Strategic Nodes and Cross-Theater Allocation

5.1 Saudi Arabia and Autonomous Strategic Nodes

Saudi Arabia illustrates why regional powers should be assessed by function rather than fixed alignment. Riyadh is simultaneously a U.S. security partner, Gulf air-defense and energy node, Red Sea logistics actor, diplomatic channel to Iran, and potential target of proxy or long-range attacks. It also maintains communication with Tehran, expands commercial ties with China, and seeks to shield its development agenda from prolonged conflict.

On July 27, Saudi Arabia said that it had intercepted drones launched from Iraq by Iran-backed groups and directed toward Saudi oil facilities and Riyadh. The Houthis separately claimed to have targeted Saudi east–west oil-transport infrastructure (Reuters, 2026c, 2026i). These incidents show how pressure can reach Saudi territory through third countries and non-state actors without their formal entry into war.

Other regional states perform related functions. Qatar combines U.S. security ties with diplomatic access to Iran; Oman remains important to arrangements surrounding Hormuz (Reuters, 2026m); Türkiye links NATO membership, Black Sea access, military capacity, and diplomatic flexibility; and the UAE combines security partnerships with financial, logistics, energy, and air-defense roles. These states do not form a coherent bloc. They operate as autonomous nodes capable of facilitating, redirecting, constraining, or amplifying interaction among larger powers.

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5.2 Pakistan as a Strategic Switch Node

Pakistan is a consequential switch node because it connects China, the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Arabian Sea. Previous EPINOVA analysis described it as a bridge across otherwise only partially connected systems (Wu, 2026d). Islamabad can facilitate communication, reduce misperception, and provide procedural legitimacy, but it cannot compel restraint by the principal belligerents (Wu, 2026b).

Reuters reported that Pakistan and Iran were exploring renewed talks with the United States following a China-supported initiative, while Pakistani officials warned that attacks on Gulf states would complicate diplomacy (Reuters, 2026h). This indicates diplomatic facilitation rather than Chinese operational involvement.

Pakistan's strategic importance lies in its ability to influence diplomatic access, political support, economic coordination, and regional alignment. Its possible pathways include continued multidirectional balancing, closer alignment with the United States and Gulf states under direct threat, or greater reliance on China-linked and Eurasian networks under sustained pressure.

5.3 Washington as a Cross-Theater Allocation Center

The near-simultaneous visits of Benjamin Netanyahu and Volodymyr Zelenskiy to Washington do not establish unified direction of the two wars. Their objectives remain distinct: Netanyahu's agenda centers on Iran and Israeli security, while Zelenskiy's focuses on diplomacy over Ukraine and continued U.S. support (Reuters, 2026f, 2026n, 2026o).

The timing nevertheless shows how separate conflicts enter the same U.S. allocation environment. Israel and Ukraine draw, to different degrees, on overlapping categories of political attention, congressional funding, intelligence, air-defense systems, interceptor production, precision munitions, industrial capacity, and diplomatic support.

Washington therefore faces simultaneous pressures of resource substitution, priority competition, and strategic coherence. Support to one theater may reduce availability elsewhere; partners compete to define their conflict as the most urgent; and U.S. objectives across regions may not be fully compatible. Distributed military architecture provides reach, but sustained pressure across multiple theaters can expose allocation limits and coordination friction (Wu, 2026c). Continentalization would intensify this challenge by increasing the number of conflicts drawing on the same military, industrial, fiscal, and political systems.

6. When Does Coupling Become Continentalization?

Weapons transfers, alliances, sanctions, and base access do not by themselves constitute battlefield integration. A higher threshold is required.

The current condition is advanced cross-theater coupling. Movement toward partial battlefield integration would depend on four developments:

- Repetition and reciprocity: recurring strikes, retaliation, deployments, basing decisions, escort operations, or operational support.
- Resource substitution and integrated allocation: material competition for interceptors, tankers, surveillance platforms, precision munitions, strategic transport, industrial capacity, or political attention.

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- Persistent node participation: recurring defensive, logistical, diplomatic, technological, basing, or corridor-management roles by third parties.
- Shared targeting and military dependence: increasing use of personnel, bases, logistics, energy, shipping, insurance, industry, or information systems in one theater to influence outcomes in another.

The analytical progression is:

**Initial cross-theater coupling → Reciprocal cross-theater escalation
→ Partial battlefield integration → Continentalized conflict system**

No single development is sufficient. The threshold would narrow if Iran repeatedly attacked Ukrainian or European nodes, Ukraine sustained attacks on Iranian interests, Russia openly supported Iranian responses, or U.S. and allied planning integrated allocation, force protection, and targeting across theaters.

Continentalization would require sustained interaction across several strategic spaces, durable third-party participation, shared resource constraints, cross-theater military dependence, and common systemic effects. The process remains reversible through diplomatic stabilization, personnel withdrawal, limits on base use, restraint in target selection, expanded production, and improved deconfliction.

7. Policy Implications

7.1 Build Cross-Theater Assessment Mechanisms

Governments should preserve regional expertise while establishing cross-theater mechanisms to track personnel deployments, base access, tanker support, shared inventories, logistics dependencies, maritime disruption, threat designation, and third-party node behavior. Regional actors should be assessed by function—what they connect, enable, redirect, constrain, or block—rather than through binary bloc categories.

7.2 Integrate Resource Substitution into Readiness Planning

Readiness assessments should incorporate replacement rates, production lead times, maintenance capacity, transport bottlenecks, and competition among theaters for specialized systems. Tactical availability does not necessarily imply strategic sustainability when several conflicts draw on the same inventories, industrial capacity, and political attention.

7.3 Protect Rear-Area Nodes and Track Technology Diffusion

Ports, rail hubs, tanker routes, airfields, repair facilities, and civilian logistics platforms may become strategic interfaces because they sustain distributed operations. Protection should emphasize redundancy, dispersal, recovery, cyber resilience, legal clarity, and mission transparency. Governments should also monitor how drone, counter-drone, electronic-warfare, targeting, and interception methods developed in one conflict are transferred or adapted in another.

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7.4 Extend Escalation Management Across Strategic Interfaces

Deconfliction should extend beyond bilateral military channels to maritime incidents, vessel notification, attribution procedures, corridor protection, technology diffusion, and communication among mediators operating across separate theaters. Not every cross-theater connection signals a wider war, but treating each incident as isolated risks missing cumulative integration. The relevant test is whether decisions in one theater increasingly require systematic consideration of their consequences in another.

8. Limitations

Several events remain contested. Ukraine's deployment of specialists is publicly documented. Iran's claim that it struck a Ukrainian facility in Dubai, the reported presence of Ukrainian personnel, and associated casualties remain unverified conflict-party claims.

The Caspian incidents are also incompletely documented. Iran's report of an attack on its vessel and Zelenskiy's confirmation of strikes on Russian vessels do not establish that the same operation, target set, or logistics network was involved. Araqchi's statement publicly raised the prospect of a response but did not establish its form, timing, target, or certainty.

British and Bulgarian access arrangements and Iranian warnings are documented. They do not establish that Iran will attack European territory, that the supporting states have become parties to the conflict, or that an attack would automatically trigger NATO military action.

Public evidence does not establish a unified Russia–Iran command or a formal mechanism integrating the Russia–Ukraine and U.S.–Israel–Iran wars. The framework identifies mechanisms and thresholds rather than predicting an inevitable continentalized conflict.

Conclusion

The current environment is not a unified intercontinental war. The Russia–Ukraine war, the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict, and confrontations around the Caspian, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and European support infrastructure remain distinct in their principal actors, objectives, command structures, and termination pathways.

The analytical position has nevertheless changed. Ukrainian specialists have entered Middle Eastern defense networks; Iran has claimed to have struck a Ukrainian facility; reported Ukrainian operations have affected Iranian and allegedly Iran-linked maritime interests in the Caspian; Tehran has stated that the attack on an Iranian vessel could not go unanswered; and selected European facilities have entered Iranian threat calculations.

These developments indicate an emerging reciprocal escalation pathway. Personnel, operational functions, support infrastructure, targeting claims, and retaliatory pressure are moving between previously separate conflict environments.

The conflicts remain below partial battlefield integration. There is no demonstrated unified command, common war aim, integrated targeting system, or publicly established Russia–Iran operational mechanism. The current condition is best described as advanced cross-theater coupling.

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The central risk is that coupling may advance faster than coordination. A tanker deployment in Bulgaria, U.S. access to a British airfield, a Ukrainian specialist team in the Gulf, or a strike in the Caspian can produce effects beyond its immediate location without any actor deliberately choosing a wider war.

Continentalization should therefore be understood as conditional and reversible. The most plausible near-term trajectory is a low-unity, high-coupling environment with a growing risk of partial battlefield integration.

China remains external to the operational structure. Wider disruption to energy, trade, Eurasian connectivity, or regional stability could draw Beijing more deeply into diplomatic and economic crisis management, but current evidence does not support treating China as a direct participant or as an actor seeking entry into either war.

Future research should examine how increasingly connected battlefields reshape the relationship among globally organized military networks, European support infrastructure, maritime corridors, escalation-control mechanisms, and industrial production systems.

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