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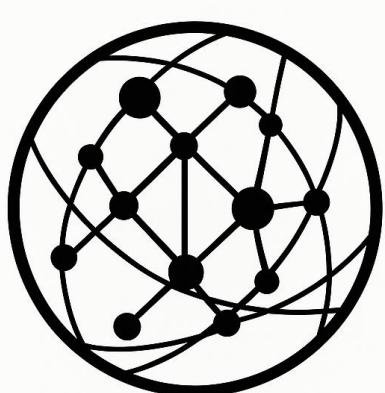
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The War That Measured America:

Why Washington Entered the U.S.–Iran Conflict, What It Revealed, and How It Accelerated a Eurasian Counter-System

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Abstract

This working paper examines the U.S.–Iran conflict as a strategic exposure event: a conflict that did not produce a simple American defeat, but made the operating limits, cost structure, alliance constraints, and systemic vulnerabilities of U.S. power more visible. The paper asks why Washington entered a war whose long-term benefits were uncertain and whose costs became increasingly apparent. It argues that the United States acted less from a clear theory of victory than from fear of the consequences of inaction: weakened deterrence, Israeli escalation, Iranian leverage over Hormuz, regional credibility loss, and perceived strategic retreat.

The paper advances two concepts. The first is the Strategic Exposure Event, which captures how conflict can reveal a major power's limits without defeating it outright. The second is the Eurasian Counter-System, a partially aligned China–Russia–Iran structure linking resources, production, logistics, technology, finance, and political narratives in ways that dilute U.S. coercive leverage. The central finding is that the United States retained strike power, diplomatic leverage, and a usable exit narrative, but lost part of its forward basing credibility, regional management capacity, alliance confidence, and strategic opacity. Washington entered the conflict to restore control; the conflict revealed the limits of American control.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran Conflict; Strategic Exposure Event; American Power; Gulf Bases; Deterrence; Strait of Hormuz; U.S.–Israel Relations; Cost Imposition; Eurasian Counter-System; China–Russia–Iran Alignment; Network War; Strategic Opacity.

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Key Judgments

- **Washington entered the conflict less from a clear theory of victory than from fear of inaction.** The United States faced simultaneous pressure to protect Israel, restore deterrence, stabilize or reopen the Strait of Hormuz, prevent Iranian escalation, and preserve regional credibility. These pressures made military action appear necessary even though the pathway from coercion to political settlement remained uncertain.
- **The U.S.–Iran conflict functioned as a strategic exposure event for American power.** It did not produce a clean American defeat, but it made visible the operating limits of U.S. power: base vulnerability, air-defense cost pressure, finite strategic bandwidth, alliance divergence, and the gap between battlefield superiority and settlement control.
- **Gulf bases shifted from instruments of dominance to contested liabilities.** If reported damage to U.S. Gulf facilities proves substantial, and if Washington follows through on force reductions or withdrawal commitments, the U.S. regional role is likely to shift from forward management toward offshore intervention, partner outsourcing, and conditional re-entry.
- **U.S. military overmatch did not automatically translate into settlement control.** The United States retained the ability to strike, defend, and sustain operations, but battlefield superiority did not produce maximal political outcomes. The conflict exposed the limits of assuming that superior force can cheaply compress an adversary's bargaining position.
- **The conflict intensified alliance and partner recalculation.** Gulf states, European allies, and Indo-Pacific partners are likely to reassess the risks of depending on U.S. protection when American bases, air-defense assets, political attention, and strategic availability appear visibly constrained.
- **Iran improved its strategic position without defeating the United States.** Iran did not need conventional victory to gain leverage. It only needed to survive, impose costs, preserve bargaining space, and demonstrate that its geography, missile forces, maritime pressure, and external ties could complicate U.S. coercion.
- **The war accelerated a modular China–Russia–Iran Eurasian Counter-System.** This is not a formal alliance, but a functional integration chain linking resources, production, logistics, technology, finance, and political narratives in ways that reduce vulnerability to U.S. pressure and dilute American coercive leverage.

Executive Summary

The U.S.–Iran conflict should be read less as a conventional victory-or-defeat case than as a postwar audit of American power. The United States retained substantial military advantages, but the conflict made those advantages more measurable, more costly, and less automatically convertible into political settlement. The central question is therefore not only what Washington gained or lost, but why it entered a war that exposed so many features of its own operating model.

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The answer is that the United States likely entered the conflict less from a clear theory of victory than from fear of the consequences of inaction. Washington faced simultaneous pressure to protect Israel, restore deterrence, prevent Iran from converting the Strait of Hormuz into durable bargaining leverage, reassure Gulf partners, and demonstrate that U.S. power remained operationally decisive. These pressures emerged in a regional environment where Iran's missile forces, unmanned systems, maritime capabilities, and proxy networks had already become central tools of regional pressure. These objectives were individually intelligible. Together, they created a strategy of compulsion rather than opportunity. War became a way to avoid the appearance of retreat, but it also created the conditions under which American limits became more visible.

Before the conflict, U.S. power in the Gulf rested on several assumptions: that forward bases provided persistent dominance; that air and missile defense could protect critical infrastructure; that U.S. strike capacity could rapidly impose decisive costs; that allies would remain synchronized under pressure; that sanctions and maritime control would compress Iran's options; and that adversaries would remain unable to transform localized conflict into system-wide pressure. These assumptions reflected an overmatch-based model of deterrence in which U.S. capability superiority was expected to translate into relatively low-cost coercive leverage.

The conflict challenged each of these assumptions. Iranian missile and drone operations exposed the vulnerability of fixed U.S. regional infrastructure. Cost-imposition dynamics forced the United States to spend expensive defensive resources against cheaper offensive systems. Maritime disruption around the Strait of Hormuz transformed the conflict from a bilateral military confrontation into a systemic chokepoint problem. U.S.–Israel divergence showed that operational alignment does not guarantee strategic synchronization. Negotiations further demonstrated that military pressure could compress U.S. objectives as well as Iranian choices.

The conflict therefore functioned as a strategic exposure event. It did not defeat the United States in any conventional sense, but it made the operating limits of American power more legible. U.S. bases remained useful, but also appeared more targetable. U.S. air defense remained effective, but also became visibly cost-disadvantaged. U.S. strike power remained formidable, but did not automatically produce settlement control. U.S. alliances remained intact, but their internal divergences became harder to conceal. In short, the conflict did not eliminate American power; it made that power easier to measure.

At the same time, the war pushed forward a broader geopolitical transformation. Iran's survival under pressure increased its value as a network node linking the Middle East to Eurasia. Russia's northern logistics and strategic depth became more relevant as Iran sought redundancy beyond the Persian Gulf. China's industrial capacity, technology ecosystem, energy demand, and sanctions-resilient financial practices gave the emerging structure greater systemic weight. Together, these actors do not form a conventional alliance. Their relationship is modular, selective, and interest-based. But that may make it more durable. It does not require ideological unity or treaty obligations. It requires only overlapping incentives to reduce U.S. coercive leverage.

The United States did not leave the conflict powerless. It retained global reach, naval power, strike capacity, sanctions authority, alliance networks, and technological superiority. But the conflict altered the meaning of those advantages. They no longer appear costless, automatic, or unlimited. The United States can still intervene, but intervention now reveals more about its operating model. It can still strike, but strikes no longer guarantee settlement control. It can still protect allies, but protection now competes with other theaters and domestic political constraints. It can still sanction adversaries, but sanctions increasingly stimulate counter-systems.

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For U.S. strategy, the central task is not simply to restore forward presence, but to rebuild credibility around resilience, cost control, alliance discipline, and multi-theater reserve capacity.

The conflict's central paradox is therefore that the United States remained the most capable external military actor in the region while becoming more legible. Washington entered the conflict to restore control. The conflict instead revealed that control had become conditional, expensive, and contested. In strategic competition, that visibility matters. The United States did not simply spend money, munitions, or political capital. It spent ambiguity.

Methodological Note

This working paper uses qualitative strategic analysis, scenario-based inference, and system-level interpretation. It draws on prior EPINOVA conflict-monitoring papers, deterrence theory, network-war literature, infrastructure interdependence studies, official U.S. defense and intelligence reports, energy and maritime data, budget and acquisition assessments, and formal media reporting. Its purpose is not to adjudicate every battlefield claim, but to interpret the systemic implications of the conflict under conditions of incomplete information.

The term “war” is used analytically to describe a sustained U.S.–Iran conflict cycle involving direct military action, maritime disruption, regional escalation, infrastructure pressure, and settlement bargaining, rather than to imply a formally declared war.

The paper treats reported base damage, withdrawal commitments, and settlement terms as analytically relevant claims requiring continued verification. Where the evidence remains uncertain, the analysis uses conditional language. The central argument does not depend on a single confirmed battle-damage estimate. It depends on the broader pattern of strategic exposure: the visibility of U.S. cost structures, alliance constraints, basing vulnerabilities, multi-theater bandwidth limits, and limits of settlement control.

1. Introduction

Wars do not only redistribute territory, destroy equipment, or produce agreements. They also reveal. They reveal which systems work under pressure, which capabilities are overstated, which alliances remain synchronized, which costs are sustainable, and which assumptions collapse when exposed to operational stress (Biddle, 2004; Freedman, 2017).

The U.S.–Iran conflict was one such event. Its significance does not lie only in the immediate battlefield results or the terms of any eventual memorandum. The broader consequence is that the conflict made the American operating model in the Middle East more visible than before.

For decades, U.S. power in the Gulf depended on forward presence. Bases, naval patrols, air-defense networks, prepositioned assets, intelligence platforms, and partner relationships allowed Washington to manage the region not only through crisis response, but through daily strategic presence. The United States did not need to fight continuously because its infrastructure communicated readiness, credibility, and access.

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That model now faces a harsher environment. Missile and drone saturation, long-range precision systems, cyber operations, maritime disruption, and information amplification have changed the meaning of forward deployment. A base is still an asset, but it is also a target. A naval presence is still a deterrent, but it is also a liability. A missile-defense umbrella still protects, but it also consumes. Permanent presence still signals commitment, but it also exposes vulnerability. This reflects a broader shift from platform-centric military competition toward networked and systemic warfare, in which critical nodes, command-and-control systems, logistics, information flows, and operational networks become central objects of pressure (Alberts et al., 2000; Cebrowski & Garstka, 1998; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; Rinaldi et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; Wu, 2026b).

The U.S.–Iran conflict did not create these trends. It made them visible.

The conflict also reveals something about American decisionmaking. Washington entered the conflict not because the strategic benefits were self-evident, but because the perceived costs of inaction had become too high. The United States faced a convergence of pressures: Israeli insecurity, Iranian retaliation, Hormuz disruption, regional credibility, domestic political demands, and the fear that restraint would be read as decline. Under those conditions, military action became a tool for restoring control.

But the conflict did not restore control in the way Washington likely intended. It exposed control as conditional, expensive, and politically constrained.

This paper therefore argues that the conflict should be understood not as a conventional victory-defeat event, but as a strategic exposure event. The United States retained major advantages, but the conflict reduced the ambiguity surrounding those advantages. Adversaries learned what kinds of pressure impose costs. Allies learned that American protection is powerful but not frictionless. Neutral actors learned that the United States can still dominate many domains while struggling to convert dominance into settlement control.

Strategic power depends not only on capability, but also on uncertainty. A state is more formidable when others cannot fully measure its limits. Once those limits become visible, adversaries can design around them, allies can hedge against them, and neutral states can bargain more aggressively. This aligns with deterrence theory's emphasis on credibility, risk, and the manipulation of uncertainty, as well as U.S. strategic documents that frame deterrence as a whole-of-government and multi-domain activity (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; Schelling, 1966; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

The conflict therefore changed the postwar question. The issue is not simply, "What did the United States gain?" It is also, "Why did Washington enter a war that made its limits more visible?"

2. The Causal Puzzle: Why Did Washington Enter the Conflict?

The most difficult question is not whether the United States retained military superiority. It did. Nor is the question whether Iran suffered damage. It did. The harder question is why Washington entered a conflict whose political benefits were uncertain and whose structural risks were substantial.

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The answer is not that the United States possessed a clear theory of victory. It entered the conflict because the perceived costs of inaction had become too high. Washington faced simultaneous pressure to protect Israel, restore deterrence, prevent Iran from converting Hormuz into durable bargaining leverage, reassure Gulf partners, and demonstrate that U.S. power remained operationally decisive. These pressures emerged in a regional environment where official U.S. assessments had long identified Iran's missile forces, unmanned systems, maritime capabilities, and proxy networks as core elements of Tehran's regional strategy (Congressional Research Service, 2024b; Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019; U.S. Central Command, 2025).

In this sense, the conflict was less a strategic opportunity than a strategic compulsion. It was entered to prevent the appearance of American retreat, but it ultimately revealed the limits of American control.

2.1 Inaction Became Politically and Strategically Costly

The first driver was the rising cost of restraint. If Washington failed to respond forcefully to Iranian pressure, attacks on U.S. assets, maritime disruption, or threats to Israel, the result could have been interpreted as a decline in American willingness to defend the regional order. Deterrence depends not only on capability, but on the credibility and clarity of the threat to respond (Jervis, 1976; Schelling, 1966).

This created a deterrence credibility trap. Action risked escalation and exposure. Inaction risked reputational erosion. In the short term, the costs of restraint were immediate, visible, and politically difficult to defend. The costs of escalation, by contrast, appeared delayed, manageable, and subject to military planning.

The Strait of Hormuz intensified this pressure. Once maritime disruption threatened energy flows, insurance markets, Gulf confidence, and global economic stability, the conflict ceased to be a narrow military confrontation. It became a systemic chokepoint problem. EIA identifies Hormuz as one of the world's most important oil chokepoints and notes that alternative routes can move only a portion of the oil volumes that normally pass through the strait (U.S. Energy Information Administration, n.d.). UNCTAD's maritime transport analysis further shows that chokepoint disruptions can extend shipping distances, force rerouting, and generate broader logistics costs (UNCTAD, 2024a, 2024b). Washington could not easily tolerate a situation in which Iran appeared able to shape passage through one of the world's most important maritime corridors. Prior analysis of the conflict shows that Hormuz shifted the war from bilateral coercion toward systemic bargaining over maritime governance and chokepoint stability (Wu, 2026d; Wu, 2026i).

Domestic politics reinforced the same logic. A perceived failure to act could be framed as weakness by domestic critics, regional partners, and adversaries. Under these conditions, doing something became politically easier than explaining restraint.

2.2 Washington Misread Coercion as Control

The second driver was confidence in coercive overmatch. Washington likely assumed that a high-intensity but bounded campaign could degrade Iranian capabilities, restore deterrence, reassure Israel, and force Tehran into a narrower bargaining space.

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This was a theory of coercive termination rather than total war. The United States did not need to occupy Iran or overthrow the regime. It needed to shock Iran into accepting a settlement more favorable to U.S. and Israeli objectives. This logic resembles classical coercion theory, in which punishment, denial, and escalation pressure are used to alter adversary behavior without full conquest (Kahn, 1965; Schelling, 1966).

The problem was that Iran did not need to win conventionally to defeat this theory. It only needed to survive, retaliate selectively, preserve leverage, and prevent the conflict from being reduced to a U.S.-defined punishment campaign. Once Tehran converted endurance into bargaining space, the conflict moved away from limited punishment and toward cost-imposition bargaining. This pattern is consistent with network-war logic, in which weaker actors seek to impose cumulative pressure on operational nodes, logistics, and decision systems rather than defeat the stronger actor symmetrically (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Wu, 2026b; Wu, 2026c).

This exposed the overmatch illusion: the belief that superior capabilities can compress an adversary's political choices at acceptable cost. Iran did not need to match U.S. capabilities. It needed to make U.S. capabilities expensive to use. GAO and CBO assessments of U.S. weapons acquisition, missile defense, and long-term defense plans underscore that military advantage is constrained by cost, replenishment, acquisition timelines, and industrial capacity (Congressional Budget Office, 2024, 2026; Government Accountability Office, 2024).

2.3 Alliance Management Became Conflict Entry

The third driver was the U.S.–Israel relationship. Washington entered the conflict partly to support Israel, but also partly to manage Israel's escalation environment. If Israel had continued or expanded operations without deeper U.S. involvement, the conflict might have moved faster toward regional war, nuclear-adjacent strikes, proxy expansion, or uncontrolled retaliation.

Direct U.S. involvement may therefore have appeared to offer a way to place a hand on the steering wheel.

But U.S. and Israeli objectives were not identical. Washington prioritized escalation control, regional stabilization, maritime flows, alliance management, and cost containment. Israel prioritized deterrence restoration, visible punishment, and long-term constraints on Iran's nuclear, missile, and proxy systems. This divergence fits the broader pattern of operational alignment without strategic identity: allies may coordinate tactically while pursuing different timelines, thresholds, and definitions of success (Wu, 2026e; Wu, 2026j).

These goals could overlap during early escalation. They diverged once conflict termination became necessary.

The result was multi-objective overload. Washington sought to protect Israel, degrade Iran, restore deterrence, stabilize Hormuz, preserve nuclear constraints, reassure allies, and contain domestic criticism through one campaign. Each objective was intelligible. Together, they were unstable.

The United States entered seeking leverage. It exited seeking a usable framework.

The conflict was therefore entered to solve a problem of control. Its central irony is that it revealed how limited that control had become.

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The same pressures that made military action appear necessary also made exposure likely: Washington entered under credibility pressure, fought through vulnerable forward infrastructure, and sought political control through military instruments whose costs became visible during the campaign.

3. Conceptual Framework: Strategic Exposure Event

Strategic Exposure Event: A conflict that reveals a major power's operating limits, cost structure, alliance constraints, and systemic dependencies without necessarily defeating that power.

A Strategic Exposure Event is a conflict or crisis that does not necessarily defeat a major power, but reveals the operating limits, cost structure, vulnerabilities, alliance constraints, and adaptation requirements of that power to external observers. This concept builds on deterrence theory, network-centric warfare, infrastructure interdependence studies, and global-risk research, all of which emphasize that power depends not only on assets but also on the resilience of connected systems under stress (Alberts et al., 2000; Helbing, 2013; Rinaldi et al., 2001; Schelling, 1966).

Strategic exposure has five dimensions.

First, it reveals capability limits. These include military performance under pressure, the resilience of bases, the sustainability of defensive systems, and the ability to convert operational success into political outcomes.

Second, it reveals cost structure. Major powers may remain capable of action, but exposure occurs when others learn what kinds of adversary behavior impose disproportionate costs.

Third, it reveals alliance constraints. Allies may remain aligned, but conflict shows whether they share the same objectives, timelines, escalation thresholds, and definitions of success.

Fourth, it reveals political tolerance. Domestic debates, funding pressure, media narratives, and election incentives show how long a government can sustain military commitments.

Fifth, it reveals systemic dependencies. Logistics, energy, maritime routes, satellite support, industrial replenishment, and financial tools all become visible as components of power.

Strategic exposure is different from military defeat. A state may win tactically while losing opacity. It may impose severe damage while revealing its own costs. It may secure an agreement while exposing the fact that maximal demands were unattainable. This distinction is consistent with systemic escalation theory, which treats conflict outcomes not simply as discrete victories or defeats, but as state transitions shaped by accumulated pressure, system coupling, and information amplification (Helbing, 2013; Wu, 2026k).

The U.S.–Iran conflict fits this pattern. The United States demonstrated extraordinary military reach, but also revealed the difficulty of protecting fixed infrastructure under repeated attack. It showed that air-defense superiority can coexist with cost disadvantage. It maintained alliance support, but exposed U.S.–Israel divergence over termination. It imposed pressure on Iran, but ultimately faced objective compression as the conflict shifted from coercive termination toward procedural stabilization (Wu, 2026c; Wu, 2026d).

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The U.S.–Iran conflict matters because it exposed all five dimensions simultaneously. It revealed U.S. capability limits, cost structures, alliance constraints, political tolerance, and systemic dependencies in a single conflict environment. Strategic exposure therefore helps explain the paradox of the conflict: the United States did not collapse, but its power became easier to measure.

4. The Gulf Base Problem: From Forward Dominance to Forward Vulnerability

The most immediate structural issue is the future of U.S. basing in the Gulf.

The analysis treats base damage as a scenario-defining claim because public verification remains incomplete.

For decades, U.S. bases in the region served three functions. They enabled rapid military projection. They reassured partners. They symbolized American regional commitment. Their presence reduced the need for constant combat because they made U.S. power continuously available.

The conflict altered this equation. If reported damage to U.S. Gulf facilities proves substantial, and if Washington follows through on force reductions or withdrawal commitments, the function of those bases changes. They no longer appear only as platforms of dominance. They also appear as fixed nodes exposed to missile, drone, cyber, and proxy pressure.

This does not mean bases become useless. It means their strategic meaning changes.

Under missile-saturation conditions, fixed bases create four vulnerabilities. U.S. Army and CENTCOM-linked analyses of integrated air and missile defense in the CENTCOM area of responsibility emphasize that U.S. forces and partners face persistent missile and drone threats from Iran and Iran-backed actors (Lucas & Wilson, 2024; U.S. Central Command, 2025).

First, they concentrate value. Aircraft, radars, fuel storage, command facilities, munitions, and personnel are located in identifiable spaces. Even hardened facilities remain vulnerable to repeated disruption, especially when the attacker does not need to destroy them completely to reduce operational tempo.

Second, they impose defense costs. The more important the base, the more expensive it becomes to defend. Missile-defense interceptors, radar coverage, repair crews, redundancy systems, and evacuation planning all increase the cost of maintaining presence. Recent CBO and Reuters reporting on large-scale U.S. missile-defense programs reinforces the broader point that missile defense is not only a technical problem but also a cost and replenishment problem (Congressional Budget Office, 2026; Stone, 2024, 2026).

Third, they create host-state exposure. Gulf partners hosting U.S. infrastructure become part of the conflict environment. Their territory, energy facilities, ports, and political legitimacy become vulnerable to pressure.

Fourth, they become evidence sites. Damage to a major base does not remain purely operational. It enters the information environment, where images, claims, debris, satellite observations, and local reporting transform base vulnerability into narrative leverage. In contemporary warfare, material evidence and recoverable artifacts increasingly shape attribution, legitimacy, and strategic perception (Wu, 2026).

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The result is a transition from bases as instruments of dominance to bases as contested liabilities.

The United States can adapt. It can disperse forces, rely more heavily on afloat platforms, increase redundancy, use rotational deployments, strengthen hardening, and shift toward offshore strike capacity. But each adaptation confirms the same structural point: permanent forward presence is becoming more costly and less politically automatic.

If Washington follows through on force reductions or withdrawal commitments after reported base damage, the regional effect would be amplified. The United States may retain the ability to strike the region, but it would have less ability to manage it through continuous presence. That is a shift from regional governance to episodic intervention.

This is not isolation. It is not disappearance. It is retrenchment under exposure. Retrenchment does not mean absence. It means that U.S. influence is likely to become more episodic, more expensive, and more dependent on partners and long-range capabilities.

5. Capability Revelation: The Conflict Measured American Power

The second major consequence is that the conflict revealed American capabilities and shortfalls in a way peacetime analysis could not.

Before the conflict, U.S. power was assessed through budgets, platforms, exercises, doctrine, and alliance statements. These indicators matter, but they do not fully reveal performance under sustained attack. Conflict does. Major-power capabilities become most visible under operational stress, when logistics, coalition reliability, escalation tolerance, and industrial resilience are tested together (Biddle, 2004; Freedman, 2017; Wu, 2026a).

The U.S.–Iran conflict revealed several operating limits.

5.1 Base Resilience Is Not the Same as Base Invulnerability

U.S. bases may remain functional after attack, but resilience is not invulnerability. A base does not need to be destroyed to be degraded. Runway disruption, fuel loss, radar damage, force protection changes, evacuation, personnel stress, or repeated alert cycles can reduce operational efficiency.

The more the United States relies on fixed infrastructure, the more adversaries can impose pressure by targeting the nodes that make U.S. power usable. In systemic warfare, operational effectiveness depends not simply on individual platforms, but on the integrity of the larger infrastructure network that sustains them (Rinaldi et al., 2001; Wu, 2026m).

5.2 Air Defense Works, But at a Cost

The United States and its partners may intercept many incoming missiles and drones, but the cost structure matters. If Iran can launch relatively inexpensive systems that compel repeated use of expensive interceptors and high-end defensive assets, then the defender may win tactically while losing economically over time.

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This is the essence of cost imposition. The attacker does not need every strike to succeed. It needs to force continuous defensive expenditure and gradually raise the probability that at least some strikes reach high-value targets. Prior analysis of this conflict identified this shift as a movement from overmatch-based deterrence to cost-imposition dynamics, in which the sustainability of defense becomes as important as tactical success (Wu, 2026c). The cost-imposition problem is reinforced by official acquisition and budget assessments showing that advanced interceptors, missile defense modernization, and complex weapons programs impose long lead times and large fiscal demands (Congressional Budget Office, 2024, 2026; Government Accountability Office, 2024).

5.3 Strike Superiority Does Not Guarantee Political Settlement

The United States can impose severe damage. But the conflict showed that damage does not automatically translate into settlement control. Iran's survival, Hormuz leverage, nuclear ambiguity, regional networks, and external support channels allowed it to remain a bargaining actor.

This distinction is crucial. Military superiority can initiate coercion. It cannot always define termination. Airpower and system-targeting theories often emphasize the ability to disable enemy systems through pressure on critical nodes, but this logic becomes less decisive when the adversary's political objective is endurance, leverage preservation, and cost imposition rather than conventional battlefield victory (Warden, 1995; Wu, 2026b; Wu, 2026c). By the late conflict stage, U.S. objectives narrowed from coercive termination and strategic degradation toward damage limitation and procedural control, while Iran sought to institutionalize surviving leverage within the settlement agenda (Wu, 2026d).

5.4 Strategic Bandwidth Is Finite

The Middle East conflict consumed political attention, air-defense assets, naval focus, diplomatic energy, and crisis-management capacity. Even if the United States remains globally powerful, simultaneous theaters create trade-offs. Ukraine, Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and Middle East commitments compete for high-demand assets and political bandwidth.

This does not mean the United States cannot manage multiple theaters. It means that the margin is visible, and visibility changes deterrence. The conflict therefore fits a broader pattern of cross-regional strategic strain, in which pressure in one theater alters perceptions of U.S. availability in another (Brands, 2022; Wu, 2026a; Wu, 2026g). This competition is consistent with CBO assessments of long-term defense costs, U.S. Navy shipbuilding constraints, official U.S. defense planning that identifies China as the pacing challenge while still requiring global campaigning and crisis response, and FY2025 budget materials reflecting simultaneous modernization, readiness, missile defense, naval, and global posture demands (Congressional Budget Office, 2024, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller], 2024; U.S. Navy, 2026).

5.5 Narrative Control Is No Longer Automatic

In earlier eras, the stronger military actor could often dominate the interpretation of a conflict. In contemporary information environments, visible resilience by the weaker actor can be interpreted as underperformance by the stronger actor. If Iran survives, retaliates, damages bases, and continues negotiating, the perception may shift from “Iran is being degraded” to “America cannot impose its will.”

That perception may be strategically disproportionate to actual battlefield results, but it matters. Modern conflict is fought not only over damage, but over interpretation. Information amplification, selective framing, and narrative velocity can produce divergence between actual system conditions and perceived system conditions (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2010; Jervis, 1976; Wu, 2026k). U.S. doctrine and congressional analysis on operations in the information environment similarly emphasize that information, perception, and decision-making are operational factors rather than secondary narratives (Congressional Research Service, 2024a).

6. The American Audit: What the United States Gained

A serious assessment should not claim that the United States gained nothing. It did gain several things.

First, it demonstrated that it remains capable of large-scale regional military action. No other outside power could replicate the combination of strike capacity, maritime control, intelligence support, alliance coordination, sanctions leverage, and diplomatic reach that the United States deployed.

Second, it likely prevented a worse immediate outcome. If the conflict was moving toward uncontrolled escalation, a negotiated framework may have reduced direct hostilities, reopened maritime flows, lowered energy-market pressure, and created a channel for nuclear sequencing. In this sense, the conflict may have shifted from direct escalation toward a managed but incomplete settlement architecture (Wu, 2026d; Wu, 2026f).

Third, it preserved core support for Israel while avoiding full regional war. That is not a minor achievement. Washington had to balance Israeli security, Iranian retaliation, Gulf exposure, energy markets, domestic politics, and multi-theater commitments.

Fourth, it maintained diplomatic centrality. Even under pressure, the United States remained indispensable to any settlement architecture. Iran could resist U.S. pressure, but could not ignore U.S. participation in sanctions relief, maritime stabilization, or nuclear arrangements.

Fifth, it secured a usable exit narrative. A conflict-ending or conflict-suspending framework can be presented as restoring navigation, reducing nuclear risk, protecting allies, and forcing Iran into negotiations.

These were procedural gains: stabilization, exit framing, and agenda control. They were not strategic gains in the stronger sense of durable regional dominance, Iranian submission, or low-cost deterrence restoration. This distinction between procedural gains and strategic gains is consistent with the broader pattern of objective compression identified in the late conflict bargaining phase (Wu, 2026d).

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Recent formal reporting on oil prices and shipping caution after the tentative reopening of Hormuz supports the distinction between diplomatic announcements and operational recovery: markets may respond quickly, but physical transit, insurance confidence, and maritime normalization can lag (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b).

The United States bought time, stabilization, and narrative flexibility. It did not buy regional dominance, Iranian submission, full proxy dismantlement, or uncontested settlement control.

7. What the United States Lost

The losses are more structural than spectacular.

7.1 Loss of Forward Basing Credibility

If reported damage to U.S. Gulf facilities proves substantial, then the credibility of forward presence changes. The issue is not whether the United States can rebuild or redeploy. It can. The issue is that adversaries and partners would now understand that those bases are targetable and costly to defend.

U.S. posture planning and CENTCOM statements already acknowledge that the regional operating environment is shaped by persistent missile, drone, maritime, and proxy threats, which reinforces the plausibility of the basing credibility problem under conditions of repeated pressure (U.S. Central Command, 2025).

A base that must be constantly defended, repaired, politically justified, and operationally dispersed still projects power, but it no longer projects effortless control.

7.2 Loss of Regional Management Capacity

If Washington follows through on force reductions or withdrawal commitments after reported base damage, U.S. regional influence would change. The United States can still return in crisis. It can still strike from distance. It can still support partners. But day-to-day management becomes harder.

Regional actors will notice. Gulf states may hedge more actively. Israel may act more independently. Iran may test boundaries. China and Russia may expand selective influence. Turkey, India, and other middle powers may seek more room.

The region does not become post-American. It becomes less automatically American-managed. Retrenchment does not mean absence; it means that U.S. influence becomes more episodic, more expensive, and more dependent on partners, long-range capabilities, and re-entry options.

7.3 Loss of Strategic Opacity

Perhaps the most important loss is opacity. Before the conflict, many limits of U.S. power were assumed but not fully observed. After the conflict, those limits became more measurable.

Observers learned which assets are scarce, which bases are vulnerable, which allies diverge, which domestic arguments constrain policy, which forms of attack impose costs, and which bargaining demands prove difficult to enforce.

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This is a form of strategic depreciation. In a competitive system, opacity is itself a strategic asset. Once a great power's limits become measurable, adversaries can design pressure strategies around them. Strategic opacity matters because adversaries do not need parity when they can identify pressure points and exploit cost asymmetries (Schelling, 1966; Wu, 2026c). This is especially important in a world where U.S. intelligence assessments warn of increasing cooperation among adversaries and where U.S. defense planning must manage simultaneous pressure across multiple regions (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025, 2026; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

7.4 Loss of Low-Cost Dominance

The United States can still dominate many military domains. But dominance now appears more expensive. If each crisis requires high-cost defense, constant replenishment, political justification, and multi-theater trade-offs, then U.S. leadership becomes more resource-intensive.

Power remains, but the price of using it rises.

7.5 Loss of Settlement Maximalism

The United States did not secure every maximal objective. If the final framework deferred nuclear issues, allowed phased sanctions relief, incorporated sovereignty language, or accepted follow-on negotiations rather than immediate settlement, then Washington moved from coercive termination to procedural management.

That is not capitulation. But it is objective compression. The conflict did not eliminate U.S. leverage, but it reduced the ability to convert that leverage into maximal political terms (Wu, 2026d).

8. Iran's Strategic Result: Not Victory, But Position Upgrade

Iran did not need to defeat the United States to improve its strategic position.

This is central to understanding the conflict. Conventional measures of victory are misleading. Iran did not become a great power. It did not acquire military parity. It did not eliminate U.S. strike capacity. It did not remove Israel from the regional equation. It did not free itself from sanctions pressure.

But Iran achieved something else: it demonstrated that it could survive American pressure, impose costs, preserve leverage, and force its own position into the settlement architecture.

Iran's strategic result can be described through four gains. This logic is consistent with DIA and CRS assessments that Iran's military power is designed less for conventional parity with the United States than for regime survival, regional deterrence, missile pressure, maritime leverage, and proxy-enabled cost imposition (Congressional Research Service, 2024b; Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019).

First, Iran proved that its distributed military system could impose persistent costs. Missiles, drones, proxy networks, maritime pressure, and information operations did not need to defeat U.S. forces directly. They only needed to make continued U.S. presence expensive and politically difficult.

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Second, Iran converted geography into bargaining leverage. The Strait of Hormuz became more than a maritime corridor. It became a negotiation device. Even if Iran did not achieve formal control over the Strait, the conflict demonstrated that maritime exposure can reshape U.S. priorities.

Third, Iran preserved nuclear bargaining space. If nuclear issues were deferred into follow-on talks rather than resolved through immediate surrender of assets or capabilities, Iran retained leverage for the next phase.

Fourth, Iran became more important to Russia and China. Its role as a Middle Eastern node, energy actor, logistics connector, sanctions-resilient state, and anti-pressure partner increased after the conflict.

Iran's achievement was therefore not battlefield victory. It was network repositioning. In prior terms, Iran's trajectory is better understood not as a transition to traditional great-power status, but as an upgrade from regional power to network node (Wu, 2026h).

9. The Eurasian Counter-System: China, Russia, and Iran After the Conflict

Eurasian Counter-System: A modular anti-pressure network linking China, Russia, Iran, and adjacent actors through resources, logistics, production, technology, finance, and political narratives to reduce exposure to U.S. coercive leverage.

The conflict pushed forward a wider structural alignment among Iran, Russia, and China.

This should not be misunderstood as a formal alliance. The three actors have different interests, different threat perceptions, and different levels of risk tolerance. China is cautious about direct military entanglement. Russia has its own war and sanctions burdens. Iran prioritizes regime survival, regional deterrence, and sanctions relief. Its importance lies in cumulative friction, not seamless coordination.

Yet formal alliance is not required for systemic effect. The counter-system logic builds on the interaction between networked pressure, sanctions adaptation, infrastructure interdependence, and official U.S. intelligence assessments of increasing cooperation among U.S. adversaries (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025, 2026; Rinaldi et al., 2001; Wu, 2026m).

What is emerging is a functional integration chain.

9.1 Resource Layer

Iran provides energy, geography, and access to the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Russia provides energy, raw materials, military-industrial experience, and northern strategic depth. China provides demand, financing capacity, industrial scale, and infrastructure tools.

Together, these form a resource triangle less vulnerable to U.S. maritime and financial pressure than isolated actors would be.

Working Paper**9.2 Production Layer**

China's manufacturing ecosystem can support dual-use technologies, electronics, drones, vehicles, machine tools, and industrial inputs. Russia contributes wartime production experience, weapons adaptation, air-defense knowledge, and sanction-survival practices. Iran contributes missile, drone, asymmetric warfare, and distributed production lessons.

The result is not a unified military-industrial bloc, but a shared adaptation environment.

9.3 Technology Layer

The conflict will likely intensify technology exchange around drones, missiles, electronic warfare, air defense, cyber operations, satellite support, AI-enabled targeting, logistics management, and sanctions-resistant industrial substitution.

Even limited knowledge transfer can matter if it helps actors improve survivability, redundancy, or cost-imposition capacity.

9.4 Logistics Layer

The Persian Gulf remains central, but the Caspian and northern routes have become more important. Russia–Iran connectivity, Central Asian transit, overland trucking, rail routes, and Caspian shipping cannot replace full maritime flows. But they can delay thresholds, sustain selective supply, and reduce the effectiveness of maritime coercion. Prior assessment of Russia–Iran northern supply capacity suggests that such corridors function less as surge logistics systems than as threshold-delaying sustainment networks (Wu, 2026n).

In systemic conflict, partial redundancy can be strategically decisive. UNCTAD and EIA reporting on maritime chokepoints reinforces the importance of route redundancy, while World Bank and IMF commodity assessments show how energy and trade disruptions can transmit through prices, inflation, and growth (International Monetary Fund, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; Reuters, 2026c, 2026d; U.S. Energy Information Administration, n.d.; UNCTAD, 2024a, 2024b; World Bank, 2025, 2026a).

9.5 Financial Layer

Sanctions pressure encourages alternatives: local currency settlement, barter, energy discounts, gray shipping, front companies, non-Western banking channels, and commodity-backed arrangements. These systems may be inefficient, but they increase resilience.

The goal is not to replace the dollar system fully. The goal is to survive enough pressure to prevent U.S. coercion from producing rapid collapse.

9.6 Political Narrative Layer

China, Russia, and Iran can converge rhetorically around sovereignty, anti-sanctions language, opposition to unilateral coercion, and criticism of Western military intervention. This narrative does not need to convince everyone. It only needs to give neutral states a vocabulary for hedging.

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The Eurasian Counter-System is therefore not a bloc. It is a modular anti-pressure network. Its power lies not in formal unity, but in the ability to generate redundancy, lower vulnerability to U.S. pressure, and complicate coercive termination.

The counter-system remains uneven, opportunistic, and limited by mistrust, sanctions exposure, and asymmetric priorities. Its strategic importance lies not in seamless integration, but in the fact that even partial coordination can reduce the effectiveness of U.S. coercive pressure.

10. Implications for U.S. Allies and Partners

The conflict will affect allied perceptions in three regions.

10.1 Gulf States

Gulf states may conclude that U.S. protection remains valuable but no longer risk-free. Hosting U.S. forces can attract attack. Depending on U.S. protection can invite escalation. Relying exclusively on Washington may reduce flexibility.

The likely response is not abandonment of the United States. It is multi-vector hedging: maintaining U.S. security ties while expanding diplomatic and economic channels with China, Russia, Iran, India, and regional actors.

10.2 Europe

European partners will read the conflict through Ukraine. If the Middle East absorbs U.S. attention, munitions, air-defense assets, and presidential bandwidth, Europe may question Washington's ability to sustain long-duration support across multiple theaters.

The issue is not whether the United States remains committed. The issue is whether commitment remains operationally sustainable. In a great-power rivalry environment, the credibility of U.S. commitments depends not only on declared priorities, but also on the ability to manage simultaneous theaters without exhausting strategic reserves (Brands, 2022). CBO and CRS analyses of U.S. defense plans and Navy shipbuilding highlight the long-term fiscal and industrial constraints behind this question (Congressional Budget Office, 2024, 2025; Congressional Research Service, 2025).

10.3 Indo-Pacific Allies

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia will assess whether a Middle East crisis reduces U.S. availability in East Asia. Deterrence depends not only on total U.S. capability, but on timely allocation.

If U.S. systems appear stretched, China may not need to conclude that America is weak. It only needs to conclude that America is busy.

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That perception can affect gray-zone behavior, blockade planning, maritime coercion, and crisis timing. This is the cross-regional chain-reaction logic: a conflict in one theater can reveal capability limits and alter threat perceptions in another (Wu, 2026a). The Department of Defense's China military power report, ODNI threat assessments, and formal reporting on U.S. threat assessments identify China as the pacing military, technological, and cyber challenge for the United States, making cross-theater distraction strategically relevant (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025, 2026; Reuters, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

11. Domestic U.S. Political Reckoning

The post-conflict audit inside the United States will not produce consensus. It will produce competing lessons.

One camp will argue that the conflict proves the need for retrenchment. From this view, Middle Eastern commitments consume resources, expose bases, divide alliances, and distract from China.

A second camp will argue that the problem was insufficient escalation. From this perspective, the United States should have struck harder, imposed clearer costs, and avoided negotiated ambiguity.

A third camp will argue for cost-managed internationalism. This view will not reject U.S. leadership, but will demand more selective commitments, better burden sharing, more resilient basing, and clearer links between objectives and costs.

These competing interpretations will shape future U.S. policy. The danger is strategic oscillation: withdrawal pressure after costly wars, followed by escalation pressure after perceived weakness, followed by another effort at controlled engagement. Historically, military doctrine and strategic posture often evolve through contested interpretations of prior wars rather than through a single agreed lesson (Posen, 1984). Such oscillation would occur against the backdrop of already significant projected defense costs, acquisition delays, shipbuilding constraints, and budgetary pressure across readiness, modernization, missile defense, and global posture requirements (Congressional Budget Office, 2024, 2025, 2026; Government Accountability Office, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller], 2024; U.S. Navy, 2026).

The conflict may therefore deepen uncertainty not only abroad, but inside Washington's own strategic community.

12. Policy Implications**12.1 Rebuild Gulf Posture Around Survivable Access, Not Symbolic Permanence**

The Department of Defense should treat Gulf posture planning less as a question of permanent presence and more as a problem of survivable access. Future posture reviews should prioritize dispersion, mobility, redundancy, hardening, deception, rapid repair, passive defense, and flexible access agreements over symbolic concentration. These priorities are consistent with the broader shift toward resilient, distributed, and networked force design reflected in U.S. defense strategy and Navy shipbuilding planning (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; U.S. Navy, 2026).

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The goal should be to preserve access without creating predictable target sets. A resilient posture would make it harder for adversaries to impose political costs through highly visible attacks on fixed infrastructure.

12.2 Treat Base Defense as a Strategic Cost Problem

Missile defense is not only an engineering challenge. It is a cost-structure problem. The United States should reduce the asymmetry between cheap attacks and expensive defense through layered systems, cheaper interceptors, directed-energy options, passive defense, distributed basing, and improved replenishment planning. CBO and GAO assessments of missile defense and weapons acquisition show that defense modernization is constrained by long timelines, high costs, and reporting challenges (Congressional Budget Office, 2026; Government Accountability Office, 2024).

A defense architecture that works tactically but drains scarce assets strategically will not solve the core problem. Sustainability should be treated as part of deterrence.

12.3 Separate Ally Protection from Ally Escalation Preferences

The White House, Department of Defense, and Department of State should distinguish core security guarantees from partner preferences that increase systemic exposure, undermine negotiations, or create escalation traps. Supporting partners does not require adopting all partner objectives.

This requires clearer alliance discipline before crises begin. The United States should define where allied defense commitments end and where partner-driven escalation preferences begin.

12.4 Build Multi-Theater Reserve Capacity

U.S. credibility depends on spare capacity. If every regional crisis consumes assets needed elsewhere, adversaries will learn to sequence pressure. Washington should treat strategic reserve capacity as a deterrence requirement rather than a budgeting inefficiency.

Reserve capacity is not waste. It is what prevents one theater from becoming an invitation for pressure in another.

12.5 Counter the Eurasian Counter-System Through Selective Disruption

The goal should not be to “break” China–Russia–Iran coordination in total. That is unrealistic. Instead, the United States and its partners should identify specific nodes: logistics chokepoints, dual-use technology flows, sanctions-evasion mechanisms, insurance networks, port access, financial intermediaries, and narrative channels.

A selective strategy is more plausible than a maximal one. The objective should be to raise the cost of coordination, not to assume that the entire counter-system can be dismantled. This approach is more consistent with the realities of sanctions adaptation, maritime rerouting, commodity-market resilience, and adversary coordination than a maximal strategy of total decoupling or total disruption (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025; UNCTAD, 2024a, 2024b; World Bank, 2026a).

Working Paper**12.6 Preserve Strategic Ambiguity Through Better Information Management**

The United States cannot hide all losses or vulnerabilities in modern conflict. But it can avoid unnecessary exposure through faster communication, coherent messaging, damage-context framing, and synchronized military-diplomatic narratives.

Information management cannot substitute for operational resilience. But without it, even manageable damage can become strategic evidence of vulnerability.

12.7 Rebuild Credibility Around Cost Control and Alliance Discipline

For U.S. strategy, the central task is not simply to restore forward presence, but to rebuild credibility around resilience, cost control, alliance discipline, and multi-theater reserve capacity.

This requires a shift from presence as symbolism to presence as sustainable leverage. The United States should measure regional posture not by how much it can deploy, but by how much it can defend, replace, conceal, and politically sustain under pressure.

13. Limitations

This paper is an analytical working paper based on scenario-based interpretation, public reporting, official reports, and prior conceptual frameworks. It does not independently verify battlefield damage claims, classified U.S. basing losses, internal negotiations, force-posture commitments, or the full terms of any U.S.–Iran memorandum.

Because the scale of damage to U.S. Gulf facilities remains difficult to verify through public sources, this paper treats base attrition as a scenario-defining claim rather than as a fully adjudicated empirical finding. If later evidence shows more limited physical damage or a different withdrawal structure, the scale of the basing conclusion should be adjusted, though the broader framework of strategic exposure may still apply. This caution is especially important because formal reporting, government statements, insurance behavior, shipping data, and satellite or debris evidence may move at different speeds and may not converge immediately after a conflict (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b; Wu, 2026l).

The paper does not argue that the United States is declining in absolute terms or that China, Russia, and Iran have formed a coherent alliance. Its argument is narrower: the conflict made U.S. operating limits more visible and intensified functional coordination among adversarial or partially aligned actors seeking to reduce U.S. coercive leverage.

The paper also does not claim that U.S. entry into the conflict was irrational in a narrow crisis-management sense. It may have been understandable under conditions of alliance pressure, deterrence anxiety, Hormuz instability, and domestic political constraint. The argument is that the decision suffered from a weak theory of termination: Washington had reasons to enter, but its pathway from entry to sustainable settlement was structurally underdeveloped.

Working Paper**Conclusion**

The U.S.–Iran war did not end American power in the Middle East. The United States remains militarily formidable, economically central, diplomatically indispensable, and technologically advanced. It can still strike, sanction, negotiate, and reassure. It remains the most capable external military actor in the region.

But the conflict changed how that power is perceived.

It exposed the vulnerability of Gulf bases. It showed the cost of defending fixed infrastructure against missiles and drones. It revealed the difficulty of converting high-end military power into rapid political settlement. It forced allies and adversaries to reassess U.S. strategic availability across multiple theaters. It pushed Iran's transformation from a regional adversary into a Eurasian network node. It encouraged China, Russia, and Iran to deepen practical integration across resources, production, logistics, technology, finance, and political narratives.

The most important point is that the war was launched to solve a problem of control. Washington feared that inaction would damage deterrence, weaken Israel, empower Iran, destabilize Hormuz, and signal strategic retreat. War appeared to offer a way to restore initiative.

But the conflict revealed that American control was less complete than assumed. The United States could escalate, but not easily define termination. It could strike, but not easily eliminate Iranian leverage. It could support Israel, but not fully synchronize Israeli objectives with U.S. system-management needs. It could pressure Iran, but not prevent Tehran from converting survival into bargaining position. It could sustain military operations, but at the cost of exposing its base vulnerabilities, defensive cost structure, and multi-theater constraints.

The United States did not simply spend money, munitions, or political capital. It spent ambiguity.

Before the conflict, many actors knew the United States had limits. After the conflict, they have a better sense of where those limits are, how they can be tested, and what it costs Washington to respond.

That is the war's lasting consequence.

America was not defeated in the ordinary sense. It was measured.

And in a world of strategic competition, being measured is itself a form of loss.

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