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# Architecture of the U.S.-Iran Conflict

## Part 1

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### Executive Summary

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a coordinated precision air campaign against Iran, eliminating the Supreme Leader, the senior leadership structure, and key nuclear program officials. The assault's defining strategic feature was its timing: it was executed while Iran had signalled readiness for suspension-related nuclear concessions and comprehensive IAEA verification. This sequencing validated the hardline premise that diplomatic concession does not guarantee regime survival, providing the resistance framework with internal legitimacy it could not have generated otherwise.

Iran responded with large-scale missile and drone strikes and subsequently closed the Strait of Hormuz. The closure operates as a precision instrument of coalition fragmentation, while Iran's position is further reinforced by its deepening strategic alignment with Russia and China. By late January 2026, that alignment had already acquired trilateral form, providing sanctions-circumvention capacity and de facto strategic support. Iran's structural durability derives from an architecture that generates positive returns across the full range of U.S. response options. The late-March ultimatum episode, in which the United States extended a hard deadline without concession, operationally confirmed this payoff structure. The United States retains short-term tactical superiority, but three categories of long-term cost are accumulating: erosion of alliance credibility, degradation of hegemonic legitimacy, and domestic political fragmentation.

This conflict is not decided by military balance. Its outcome will be determined by which coalition sustains internal cohesion and manages the compounding costs of prolonged engagement, a dimension on which the structural architecture currently favors Iran's strategy of attrition.

## **Origins of the Conflict**

In the early hours of February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a coordinated surprise air campaign against Iran, conducting several hundred precision strikes within a twelve-hour window. The assault killed the Supreme Leader and the entirety of Iran's senior leadership, along with senior nuclear program officials, and resulted in substantial civilian casualties.

The defining structural feature of this conflict is not the scale of the strikes but their timing. According to Al Jazeera's contemporaneous reporting, the attack was carried out while Iran had signalled readiness for suspension-related nuclear concessions and comprehensive IAEA verification, with follow-on negotiations scheduled within days. This sequencing proved consequential: by demonstrating that maximum diplomatic concessions could not forestall military action, the strikes provided decisive validation for the hardline argument that regime survival through negotiation is structurally impossible. The premise that accommodation invites elimination, rather than security, has since become axiomatic within Iran's strategic calculus.

Iran responded immediately, launching large-scale ballistic missile and drone strikes against Israel and multiple U.S. military installations across the Gulf region.

## **Strategic Objectives of Each Party**

The United States seeks to achieve several interlocking objectives: securing control of the Strait of Hormuz and reasserting regional primacy in the Middle East; physically degrading Iran's nuclear and missile programs; guaranteeing the security of Israel and Gulf partner states; and restoring the credibility of the U.S.–Israel alliance as a deterrent framework.

Iran's strategic objectives are correspondingly layered. They include consolidating domestic cohesion through an anti-American resistance ideology; imposing structural uncertainty on Western energy and supply chains; suppressing internal reform and dissident pressures by reframing political contestation as wartime disloyalty; and re-establishing Iran as the gravitational center of an anti-Western regional bloc.

## **The Strategic Logic of the Hormuz Closure**

Characterizing the Hormuz closure as a blunt instrument of economic coercion misreads its operational logic. The strategy operates across three distinct layers.

The first is the gradual accumulation of domestic discontent within Western societies. As

energy, logistics, and consumer goods prices rise, publics in Western nations increasingly question their governments' Iran policies. Since the outbreak of hostilities, international oil prices and LNG spot rates have risen sharply, and inflationary pressure on household consumption in major economies has become visible.

The second layer is the deliberate erosion of Western alliance cohesion. As supply chain disruptions compound, European and Asian partners face mounting incentives to distance themselves from Washington's maximalist posture. Merchant vessel traffic through the Gulf has fallen precipitously since the closure, with a substantial number of ships anchored outside the Strait. Multiple Western allied governments have begun voicing public concern over the economic consequences of prolonged conflict.

The third layer is attritional psychological warfare. By making the costs of conflict tangible in everyday life, Iran aims to accumulate war fatigue within Western societies and generate domestic political pressure to question the sustainability of continued military engagement.

In sum, the Hormuz closure is not a blunt economic weapon but a precision instrument of internal fragmentation, designed to erode the political cohesion of the opposing coalition over time.

## **War as a Mechanism of Domestic Consolidation**

Iran has historically mobilized anti-American resistance ideology as a central pillar of regime legitimacy. In a prolonged conflict, the narrative of resistance against external aggression functions to suppress secular reform demands and dissident activity, even in the absence of the senior leadership that originally prosecuted the war.

Iranian society carries deep structural memory of foreign intervention, rooted in Persian national identity, the 1953 U.S.-backed coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mosaddegh, and the collective experience of the Iran–Iraq War. These historical sediments provide the regime with a degree of popular solidarity under conditions of external threat that external observers consistently underestimate.

## **Reconstitution of an Anti-Western Strategic Bloc**

By late January 2026, Iran's strategic alignment with Russia and China had become sufficiently consolidated to function as a trilateral support structure. Built upon the existing Iran-China and Iran-Russia partnership frameworks, this alignment linked nuclear sovereignty, economic coordination, and resistance to Western sanctions into

a shared strategic logic. Although it did not constitute a formal mutual defense pact, it provided Iran with sanctions-circumvention capacity and de facto external support under conditions of prolonged conflict.

That alignment does not constitute a mutual defense commitment analogous to NATO Article 5; it remains a framework for strategic coordination rather than collective defense. Nonetheless, as Iran imposes structural strain on Western energy and supply networks through the Hormuz closure, Russia, China, and India each face incentives to interpret U.S. leadership fatigue as a strategic opportunity, creating conditions in which de facto support for Iran's position becomes the path of least resistance.

## **Resistance as Rational Regime Survival Strategy**

The Iranian regime operates from the premise that capitulation to U.S. pressure does not guarantee survival. The February 2026 strikes provided stark empirical confirmation of this assumption: Iran had moved toward extensive nuclear concessions under international mediation, yet military action followed regardless. This sequence has fortified the hardline position that negotiated security guarantees are structurally unreliable.

Furthermore, military strikes cannot physically eliminate Iran's accumulated nuclear knowledge and technical expertise. The overwhelming assessment among arms control specialists is that such strikes are more likely to strengthen Iran's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons than to eliminate the underlying capability. Under these conditions, resistance, even at severe cost, becomes preferable to accommodation that offers neither survival guarantee nor strategic benefit.

## **The Actual Structure of Iranian Domestic Opinion**

The widespread assumption that the Iranian population fundamentally opposes the current regime reflects a systematic observational bias. Voices critical of the government that appear on social media and in Western outlets are predominantly those of diaspora Iranians or a small minority of internal dissidents; these voices are structurally overrepresented in Western media ecosystems.

The domestic reality is more complex. Given the extreme costs of expressing political dissent inside Iran, genuine opposition sentiment, to the extent it exists, cannot surface publicly. Silence under these conditions is not consent; it is a survival calculation. Conflating the absence of visible dissent with the absence of grievance is an analytical error. Conversely, conflating visible dissent, amplified through external media, with

representative opinion is an equally significant distortion.

For the sake of analytical completeness, countervailing assessments deserve acknowledgment. Reform-oriented currents within Iranian society have argued that the war provides hardliners with a pretext to intensify domestic repression, and inter-factional tension has not disappeared. However, for such internal fractures to generate regime-threatening pressure, they would need to accumulate sufficient force to override the external aggression narrative that currently dominates the domestic political space. That threshold has not been reached.

## **The Accumulating Costs of a Prolonged War for the United States**

The United States holds an unambiguous short-term tactical advantage. However, three categories of long-term cost are accumulating in ways that merit serious strategic attention.

The first is the erosion of alliance credibility. Major NATO partners have collectively declined to participate in the Iran conflict, and several have publicly criticized the United States for initiating hostilities without prior consultation. Some allied governments have adopted the awkward posture of condemning Iranian actions while simultaneously calling on Washington to clarify its military objectives, a dual-track position that reflects genuine alliance strain rather than performative diplomacy. The structural tension between alliance obligations and allied states' economic and diplomatic interests has, in this conflict, become openly visible.

The second is the degradation of U.S. hegemonic legitimacy. Launching a military campaign against a party that had signalled readiness for extensive nuclear concessions and comprehensive IAEA verification has produced serious alienation among mediating states and has accelerated the disengagement of non-aligned and developing nations from U.S.-led institutional frameworks. The physical limits of airpower as a nonproliferation instrument have also been reconfirmed: precision strikes can degrade facilities, but they cannot destroy accumulated scientific knowledge, and they carry a substantial probability of increasing the target state's motivation to acquire nuclear capability.

The third is domestic political fragmentation. The Iran conflict has failed to generate bipartisan political support within the United States. Inflationary pressures associated with both the conflict and pre-existing tariff policies have undermined the credibility of the administration's economic commitments. The resulting domestic tension constitutes a structural constraint on the sustainability of prolonged engagement.

The United States does retain structural advantages as an energy-producing economy, and the supply chain costs of the conflict are disproportionately absorbed by energy-import-dependent manufacturing economies in East Asia and Europe. In the short term, this asymmetry favors Washington. Over the longer term, however, the accumulation of alliance credibility deficits risks degrading the very coalition architecture that underpins U.S. global leadership.

## **Iran's Structural Payoff Across All U.S. Response Options**

Iran's strategic durability derives from an architecture that generates positive returns regardless of how the United States responds.

If the United States intensifies military operations, Iran consolidates the resistance narrative, deepening domestic cohesion and generating sympathy among regional and non-Western actors.

If the United States escalates economic sanctions and financial pressure, Iran leverages its trilateral alignment with Russia and China to access alternative trade routes, informal economic channels, and sanctions-circumvention mechanisms. Paradoxically, Western efforts to manage the supply shock created by the Hormuz closure have already accelerated the consolidation of Russia- and China-centered energy corridors, a development that serves Iran's long-term strategic interests.

If the United States opts for restraint to avoid direct escalation, Iran sustains the Hormuz closure and maintains continuous asymmetric pressure on Western economic systems.

If the United States pursues the comprehensive destruction of the Iranian state, Iran accepts substantial damage while inflicting structural reputational harm on the United States and Israel, permanently degrading American geopolitical credibility in the region.

This payoff structure was confirmed in operational terms during the late-March deadlock, when the United States issued a hard-deadline ultimatum to Iran and subsequently extended that deadline without any corresponding concession. This outcome is consistent with the structural logic: executing the threat would transfer escalation responsibility to Washington, while withdrawing it would publicly demonstrate the limits of American coercive credibility. Both paths imposed costs on the United States; neither path delivered meaningful leverage over Iran.

## **Why Allied States Have Declined to Participate**

The structural position of U.S. allies explains their reluctance without resort to purely political explanations. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the major European economies are directly dependent on Gulf energy and semiconductor supply chains. In a prolonged conflict scenario, they absorb the leading edge of economic disruption. This structural exposure creates an objective asymmetry between U.S. strategic interests and allied interests, which political solidarity cannot indefinitely paper over.

Additional factors compound this structural divergence: sustained public skepticism toward unilateral U.S. military interventionism; humanitarian concerns regarding civilian casualties in Iran; and the economic logic of maintaining trade relationships with China and Russia, whose strategic importance has only grown as the conflict has progressed.

The British case illustrates the dynamic with particular clarity. According to reporting by The Independent and the New York Post, the United Kingdom initially declined U.S. requests for basing rights, subsequently agreed to limited military cooperation on the grounds of regional escalation risk, but has consistently refused direct combat participation while publicly advocating for de-escalation. This trajectory reflects not inconsistency but the predictable behavior of an ally caught between formal alliance obligations and self-interested constraints, precisely the dynamic that Iran's strategy is designed to exploit and deepen.

## **Structural Assessment**

The United States enters this conflict with decisive short-term tactical superiority. The exercise of that superiority, however, is consuming long-term strategic assets: alliance trust, hegemonic legitimacy, and domestic political cohesion. Iran enters the conflict from a position of military inferiority, yet the manner in which the conflict began, with U.S. military action during a phase in which Iran had signalled readiness for extensive nuclear concessions under international mediation, provided the hardline resistance framework with a degree of internal legitimacy it could not have generated through any other means. Reinforced by its trilateral alignment with Russia and China, and armed with the asymmetric leverage of the Hormuz closure, Iran is prosecuting a conflict of strategic attrition designed to erode the internal cohesion and alliance structures of the opposing coalition over time.

This conflict cannot be assessed through the lens of conventional military balance. Its outcome will be determined by which coalition can sustain internal political cohesion, maintain allied solidarity, and manage the domestic costs of prolonged engagement.

That is the fundamental nature of the competition now underway.

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