

Architecture of the U.S.-Iran Conflict

Part 2

Author Daeho Lee

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Executive Summary

The current conflict is better understood not as a campaign designed to extract immediate strategic gains from striking Iran, but as one intended to establish negotiating dominance through a swift and decisive victory, thereby securing longer-term advantages. However, Iran has not collapsed on the anticipated timeline, and cumulative costs to the United States have begun to mount through the threat of Hormuz closure and the growing controversy over civilian casualties. As a result, the original payoff structure underlying the operation is beginning to erode. The conflict is therefore moving toward a cost architecture that becomes increasingly unfavorable to Washington over time, raising the likelihood of eventual convergence toward negotiation.

The Illusion of Surface Causality and the Original Blueprint

Conventional explanations such as nuclear containment, oil access, Hormuz control, or coercive signaling are frequently invoked, yet none of these objectives is secured through airstrikes in any direct or immediate sense. The explanatory power of these rationales remains weak relative to the intensity of the military action undertaken. Nuclear concerns alone do not adequately account for the scale of the operation. Oil acquisition does not follow directly from targeting. Hormuz control risks producing the opposite of the intended effect. Reputational signaling is also insufficient as a standalone justification, given the scale of the international risks involved. The actual purpose of the conflict, therefore, is more plausibly located at a deeper strategic level than surface-level justifications suggest.

Reverse-engineering that deeper layer yields the following design hypothesis. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Iran was understood as a threatening actor, though not necessarily as a regime on the verge of imminent collapse. The nuclear issue provided a surface-level *casus belli*, but it was insufficient as a single explanatory variable. The United States and Israel likely viewed Iran as a long-term strategic burden, a node that needed to be restructured rather than merely contained.

It was on this foundation that the decision to open hostilities and execute a decapitation strike was constructed. The removal of Khamenei was conceived as the central shock, intended to fracture Iran's command architecture and destabilize its psychological equilibrium within a compressed timeframe. The entire structure was premised on a rapid and decisive outcome. The envisioned scenario involved early Iranian capitulation, a forced negotiating posture, the consolidation of a victory narrative for the United States and Israel, and the extraction of negotiating dominance across the full spectrum of issues, including nuclear policy, Hormuz, and regional order.

In essence, this conflict is better understood not as a war fought to capture direct spoils, but as a war designed to coercively engineer favorable conditions for negotiation.

Iran's Antifragile Cohesion and the Phase Shift

The central miscalculation lies in Iran's failure to collapse on schedule. Iran is not simply a repressive state marked by internal discontent. It is also structurally configured to generate stronger internal cohesion under conditions of external attack. In structural terms, the probability of regime disintegration in response to a short-duration shock was considerably lower than Washington appeared to assume.

The reasons are architectural. External attack reinforces Iran's internal resistance narrative. Regime cohesion can function independently of the existence of dissident factions. Iran also retains Hormuz as an asymmetric pressure instrument. While Iran may be conventionally inferior in military terms, it is not a structurally fragile state. The rapid systemic shock that Washington expected to produce destabilization therefore carried a substantial risk of generating the opposite effect, consolidating rather than fracturing Iranian cohesion.

Once the rapid-victory premise fails, the structural logic of the entire enterprise begins to reverse. The negotiating advantage that the initial shock was meant to create dissipates, while time-dependent cost accumulation moves to the foreground. From this inflection point onward, the conflict ceases to be primarily a question of strike efficacy and becomes a question of which side can absorb costs over time. Iran can generate strategic space simply by enduring, whereas the United States faces structural pressure to bring the conflict to a rapid close. As time passes, Iran's survival narrative strengthens while American legitimacy erodes and domestic political costs accumulate.

This phase transition can be described across four stages. First, Iran's failure to collapse, combined with the materialization of Hormuz closure, generates inflationary pressure and global cost transmission, and the conflict begins to exhibit the characteristics of a protracted engagement. Second, as the rapid-victory scenario fails, the initial negotiating advantage weakens. Civilian casualty controversies degrade American legitimacy, while Iran consolidates its survival narrative. Third, as both sides approach their respective limits, with the United States unable to sustain a prolonged campaign and Iran unable to endure indefinitely, loss minimization displaces victory as the operative objective. Fourth, nonlinear variables such as domestic public sentiment, leadership succession dynamics, the degree of Sino-Russian entanglement, and the feasibility of a viable negotiating framework emerge as the decisive determinants of the conflict's terminal trajectory.

The baseline structural logic points toward negotiated convergence. The specific path to that convergence, however, remains highly sensitive to the intervention of nonlinear variables.

Asymmetric Cost Functions and the Closed Node

In a protracted conflict, American cost trajectories escalate more steeply than Iranian ones. The critical variable is not Iranian superiority in absolute terms, but the asymmetry in the rate of cost accumulation over time. The United States bears costs that compound faster as the conflict extends. Symbolically resonant incidents of civilian harm, such as

strikes on educational facilities, are not merely tactical accidents. They are variables capable of delegitimizing the continuation of the conflict at a structural level. According to statements issued by United Nations bodies and UN human rights experts, an airstrike on a girls' primary school in Minab, Iran, on February 28, 2026, resulted in mass child casualties and was characterized as a grave violation of the principles protecting schools and children. Such incidents do not merely add to the military cost ledger. They convert the cost of war from battlefield attrition into the erosion of moral legitimacy.

Economic costs have also become visible. According to reporting by the Associated Press, the national average price of regular gasoline in the United States surpassed \$3.84 per gallon in mid-March, the highest level recorded since September 2023. The same reporting noted that Brent crude had exceeded \$108 per barrel, with the surge in energy prices placing pressure on American households and consumption while threatening to reignite inflationary dynamics in the short term. In other words, the costs of war are already being translated into domestic economic variables within the United States.

Beyond this, analysis in The Chosun Ilbo's English-language edition indicated that the threat of Hormuz closure functioned as a variable capable of fracturing market consensus on the stagflation outlook. This reflects not merely an oil-price shock, but the emergence of a broader structural perception that the war is imposing simultaneous growth deceleration and inflationary pressure on the American economy. The United States may be militarily dominant, yet it is structurally more vulnerable to erosion across the dimensions of legitimacy, inflation, public opinion, and political sustainability.

The cost function for the United States, $C_{US}(t)$, is composed of inflationary pressure, domestic political strain, the moral legitimacy deficit generated by civilian casualties, the accumulation of prolonged-war fatigue, and the progressive narrowing of the ground-force deployment option.

This last component warrants separate emphasis. In an environment already unfavorable across the dimensions of legitimacy, time, public support, and cost, the introduction of ground forces is more likely to exacerbate the structural problem than to resolve it. Air operations can be managed as a limited engagement, but ground deployment signals a transition to total war. It entails an explosion of cost, the locking-in of a protracted timeline, intensified domestic opposition, and a sharply elevated threshold for eventual withdrawal. The ground-force option therefore becomes progressively less viable as the conflict extends.

This does not render Iran's position indefinitely favorable. Iran also operates under economic, military, and societal constraints that impose finite limits on its capacity to

endure. The resulting structure is therefore not one of unilateral Iranian advantage, but a dual-limit architecture in which the United States experiences costs more acutely and earlier, while Iran is also unable to hold indefinitely. It is precisely this structure that repositions the conflict around loss minimization rather than competitive victory, thereby increasing the probability of negotiated convergence.

Network Contagion Risk

Iran may initially have been a discrete and isolated risk node. However, if American military action drives Iran into deeper alignment with China and Russia, the conflict ceases to function as a singular engagement and instead transforms into a networked risk structure. According to Al Jazeera, China called for an immediate halt to military operations by the United States and Israel, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi stating that force cannot resolve the problem and will generate serious long-term consequences. The same reporting indicated that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that he had seen no evidence that Iran was developing nuclear weapons, warned that the current war could accelerate nuclear proliferation, and affirmed that Russia stood ready to assist in achieving a diplomatic resolution. China and Russia are therefore moving to enhance Iran's survivability not through direct military intervention, but through diplomatic cover and strategic rear support.

The significance of this dynamic extends beyond the geographic expansion of the conflict. It broadens the cost structure that the United States must manage. Washington is no longer dealing solely with a war of attrition against a single adversary. It is instead positioned to absorb a wider set of geopolitical cascading costs. Paradoxically, this dynamic may intensify rather than relieve the pressure on the United States to engineer an early transition to a negotiated phase.

The Negotiation Attractor

From the perspective of the Trump administration, the external imperative is to maintain a credible victory narrative, while the internal imperative is to reduce actual costs. Under these conditions, negotiation is unlikely to take the form of straightforward retreat. It is more likely to be structured so that it appears externally as an extraction of concessions, while internally involving substantive compromise and loss reduction. The result is a hardline victory framing for external consumption, combined with the quiet absorption of the practical cost of concession.

On the basis of the evidence currently available, this conflict more closely resembles

a structure converging toward negotiation after the failure of the rapid-victory premise than one moving toward durable military victory. The most probable terminal outcome is a form of deceptive negotiation, one that packages its external framing in maximalist terms while embedding mutual concession in its operational substance.

What ultimately matters in the terminal phase is therefore not the question of unilateral victory, but whether both parties move toward loss-minimizing negotiation as the mechanism for returning marginal costs to manageable levels. The caveat that must be preserved, however, is that nonlinear variables, including public sentiment, leadership succession, and the depth of Sino-Russian entanglement, retain the capacity to alter the convergence path substantially.

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