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Military Escalation between Iran and the United States: Risk, Deterrence, and Regional Stability

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Abstract

The military confrontation between Iran and the United States has evolved from a prolonged strategic rivalry into a multidimensional security crisis involving direct military operations, missile and drone attacks, maritime disruption, economic coercion, nuclear tensions, cyber operations, and the activities of regional armed groups. The escalation that intensified during 2026 has demonstrated the limitations of traditional deterrence approaches and exposed the vulnerability of the wider Middle Eastern security architecture. This study examines the relationship between military escalation, strategic deterrence, escalation risk, and regional stability in the context of U.S.–Iran confrontation. Using a qualitative research design based on analysis of recent developments, scholarly literature, policy studies, and secondary sources, the study evaluates how military signaling and coercive strategies influence the behavior of Iran, the United States, and regional actors. The analysis demonstrates that deterrence can prevent some forms of direct aggression but can simultaneously generate escalation when the adversaries interpret defensive measures as preparation for offensive action. The conflict also demonstrates the importance of indirect and asymmetric instruments, particularly attacks on maritime infrastructure, energy facilities, military bases, and regional partners. The Strait of Hormuz has emerged as a particularly important arena because disruption of maritime traffic produces consequences extending well beyond the immediate belligerents. The study argues that sustainable regional stability cannot be achieved through military deterrence alone. A combination of credible defensive deterrence, crisis communication, maritime security arrangements, nuclear risk reduction, regional diplomacy, and confidence-building mechanisms is required. The paper concludes that unmanaged deterrence may create a security dilemma in which each side's effort to increase security contributes to greater insecurity for the entire region.

Keywords: Iran, United States, regional stability, Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, asymmetric warfare; security dilemma

Introduction

The relationship between Iran and the United States represents one of the most persistent and consequential strategic rivalries in contemporary international politics (Ostovar et al., 20224). Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, bilateral relations have been characterized by diplomatic hostility, economic sanctions, military confrontation, competing regional alliances, proxy conflicts, nuclear disputes, and repeated cycles of crisis and retaliation (Johnson et al., 2024).

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The rupture in relations following the revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis established a foundation of profound mistrust that has continued to influence the strategic calculations of both states. The United States has generally sought to constrain Iran's regional influence, missile and nuclear capabilities, and relationships with armed groups, whereas Iran has viewed U.S. military presence and political influence in the Middle East as major threats to its sovereignty and national security. Consequently, the relationship has evolved into a prolonged strategic competition in which diplomatic, economic, military, and indirect instruments of power are frequently employed simultaneously. The post-1979 relationship has experienced several major phases of confrontation. Economic sanctions became an increasingly important instrument of U.S. policy, particularly as concerns over Iran's nuclear activities intensified (Wilson et al., 20221). At the same time, Iran expanded its regional security networks and developed missile, drone, maritime, and other asymmetric capabilities intended to compensate for its conventional military disadvantages. The nuclear issue subsequently became a central component of the rivalry, producing negotiations as well as periods of intensified coercion. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action temporarily demonstrated that diplomacy could establish constraints and verification mechanisms, but the subsequent deterioration of the agreement reinforced the broader pattern of mistrust. As a result, the U.S.–Iran relationship has remained characterized by a recurring cycle in which diplomatic engagement is followed by renewed pressure, military signaling, sanctions, retaliation, and efforts to restore deterrence.

The contemporary confrontation is particularly significant because it has expanded beyond a conventional bilateral military competition. Military operations increasingly interact with economic sanctions, nuclear policy, maritime security, cyber capabilities, missile and drone warfare, regional armed groups, energy security, and domestic political considerations. The boundaries between deterrence, compellence, retaliation, and escalation have consequently become increasingly difficult to distinguish (Art et al., 2018). Measures intended by one side to strengthen deterrence may be interpreted by the other as preparation for offensive action. Similarly, economic measures designed to impose bargaining costs may generate incentives for asymmetric retaliation rather than political accommodation. This creates a classic security-dilemma environment in which attempts by each side to increase its own security can simultaneously increase the perceived insecurity of the adversary. The strategic environment changed substantially during 2026 as the confrontation developed into an active interstate conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel 9Mahdi et al., 2026). The Council on Foreign Relations currently characterizes the situation as an interstate war and identifies Iran's nuclear program, sanctions, and the Strait of Hormuz among the major unresolved issues (Sayın et al., 2020). Its current assessment reports that U.S. and Israeli attacks in February 2026 targeted Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure, while subsequent ceasefire and negotiation efforts failed to produce a durable settlement. This development is important for deterrence research because it provides an empirical setting in which conventional military superiority, asymmetric retaliation, economic coercion, maritime pressure, and nuclear signaling interact simultaneously.

The central strategic asymmetry between the two countries is also important. The United States possesses considerably greater conventional military capabilities, including advanced air and naval forces, precision-strike systems, intelligence and surveillance capabilities, global logistics, and extensive regional alliances (Muzalevsky et al., 2017). Iran, however, does not need to achieve conventional military parity to challenge U.S. interests. Its strategic approach relies

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substantially on asymmetric capabilities, including ballistic missiles, drones, maritime threats, regional partnerships, and the ability to impose costs on forward-deployed forces and regional infrastructure. This creates an important distinction between military superiority and escalation dominance. A state may possess superior conventional capabilities while still being unable to prevent an adversary from generating high political, economic, and military costs. Iran's geographical position provides an additional source of strategic leverage (Reisinezhad et al., 2020). The country occupies the northern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime passage connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The waterway is among the world's most strategically important energy chokepoints. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, approximately 20.9 million barrels per day of oil moved through the Strait during the first half of 2025, equivalent to about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption and approximately one-quarter of global maritime oil trade. Around 89% of crude oil and condensate transported through the Strait during this period was destined for Asian markets (Smailis et al., 2025). The strategic importance of Hormuz therefore extends well beyond the immediate U.S.–Iran rivalry because disruption can affect Asian economies, global energy prices, maritime insurance, shipping routes, and international economic stability.

The significance of the Strait of Hormuz has become increasingly evident during the current conflict. Recent U.S. Energy Information Administration data indicate that oil flows through the Strait declined from approximately 21.6 million barrels per day in late 2025 to 4.9 million barrels per day in the second quarter of 2026 (Considine et al., 2014). This demonstrates how regional military confrontation can rapidly generate global energy and economic consequences. The Strait also illustrates asymmetric deterrence. Iran can threaten maritime traffic through its geographical position, missiles, drones, mines, and other maritime capabilities without possessing naval power comparable to that of the United States. Although the United States has superior naval capabilities, protecting maritime traffic exposes its forces to additional risks. Thus, both sides retain the ability to impose costs on the other. The confrontation also has significant regional implications. Gulf states remain vulnerable to Iranian capabilities while depending on U.S. security guarantees. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Israel may become involved through military operations, regional armed groups, or competing security interests. Consequently, an initially bilateral confrontation can spread across multiple theaters, making escalation management more difficult.

Iran's regional partner and armed-group networks further complicate deterrence. Attacks conducted by these actors may generate U.S. or allied retaliation against Iranian interests, particularly when responsibility is uncertain. Such attribution problems can transform indirect confrontation into direct interstate escalation. Economic coercion is another major component of the rivalry. U.S. sanctions can restrict Iran's financial resources, energy exports, and access to international markets (Ahmadi et al., 2018). However, prolonged economic pressure may also encourage Iran to develop alternative economic networks and employ asymmetric responses. Sanctions can therefore strengthen U.S. leverage while simultaneously creating incentives for continued resistance. The nuclear dimension further increases strategic uncertainty. Military attacks may damage nuclear infrastructure but cannot eliminate scientific knowledge or the political motivations behind Iran's nuclear program. If Tehran perceives conventional capabilities as insufficient for national security, military pressure could increase the perceived value of nuclear capabilities. This creates a paradox in which coercive efforts to reduce nuclear risks may, under certain conditions, increase nuclear incentives.

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The U.S.–Iran case therefore demonstrates the limitations of traditional deterrence theory. Although military superiority remains important, asymmetric capabilities, proxy networks, incomplete information, and mutual distrust make deterrence more complex. Measures intended to strengthen security may simultaneously increase the adversary's threat perception. Accordingly, this study examines U.S.–Iran relations through multidomain deterrence, considering military power alongside economic coercion, nuclear strategy, maritime competition, and regional networks. Escalation is viewed as an interconnected process in which military actions can trigger economic, maritime, proxy, or nuclear responses. The findings are particularly relevant to regional stability. Deterrence may prevent unrestricted warfare while encouraging indirect forms of confrontation below the threshold of full-scale war. A maritime incident may trigger military retaliation, sanctions may encourage asymmetric responses, and attacks on nuclear facilities may increase nuclear incentives. This creates a condition of controlled but fragile deterrence. The central issue is therefore whether military superiority can produce stable deterrence under conditions of asymmetric capabilities, regional proxy networks, maritime vulnerability, nuclear uncertainty, and mutual distrust. The study consequently evaluates these factors and identifies mechanisms—including crisis communication, maritime deconfliction, nuclear diplomacy, regional dialogue, and confidence-building—that can reduce miscalculation and support sustainable regional stability.

Research Problem

Traditional deterrence theory generally assumes that states can communicate credible threats and calculate the costs and benefits of military action. The U.S.–Iran relationship complicates this assumption. Iran possesses fewer conventional military capabilities than the United States but has developed alternative mechanisms for imposing costs, including ballistic and cruise missiles, drones, maritime pressure, cyber capabilities, and relationships with armed groups. The United States possesses overwhelming conventional military superiority but faces geographical, political, economic, and escalation constraints.

Consequently, military superiority does not automatically translate into political control. A weaker actor may deter a stronger actor by demonstrating the capacity to impose unacceptable costs, while the stronger actor may attempt to compensate through increasingly coercive measures. This interaction can generate a security dilemma and create pathways toward unintended escalation.

Research Objectives

The study has four principal objectives:

1. To examine the major drivers of military escalation between Iran and the United States.
2. To analyze the role of deterrence and coercive strategies in the bilateral confrontation.
3. To evaluate the implications of escalation for regional stability and security.
4. To identify mechanisms capable of reducing escalation risks while maintaining credible deterrence.

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Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What factors are driving military escalation between Iran and the United States?
2. How effective is military deterrence in preventing further escalation?
3. How do asymmetric capabilities influence the strategic balance?
4. What are the consequences of U.S.–Iran escalation for regional stability?
5. What mechanisms could reduce the probability of uncontrolled military escalation?

Literature Review

Deterrence and U.S.–Iran Relations

Deterrence broadly refers to the attempt to prevent an adversary from taking an action by threatening unacceptable costs. Compellence differs from deterrence in that it seeks to persuade an adversary to change an existing policy or behavior. The U.S.–Iran relationship illustrates the difficulty of applying either strategy straightforwardly. Scholarship on the bilateral relationship emphasizes that both deterrence and compellence can generate significant second- and third-order consequences, particularly when the objectives of the two sides are fundamentally incompatible. Iran has historically relied on a combination of conventional military capabilities, asymmetric warfare, strategic patience, and relationships with non-state actors (Ahmadzada et al., 2024). The United States, meanwhile, has employed military deployments, sanctions, diplomatic isolation, intelligence operations, and direct military strikes. The resulting interaction is not a simple competition between two military forces. Instead, it is a contest involving multiple domains and multiple actors.

Strategic Patience and Active Deterrence

Recent scholarship argues that Iran's approach has undergone a transformation from strategic patience toward more active forms of deterrence. Abbas and Kazmi describe this transformation as an important development in the regional security order, arguing that Iranian strategy increasingly seeks to impose costs directly rather than simply absorbing external pressure (Abbas et al., 2026). This transformation has major implications for escalation management. If Iran concludes that restraint encourages further pressure, it may increasingly favor retaliation as a means of restoring deterrence. Conversely, Washington may interpret Iranian retaliation as evidence that previous deterrence measures were insufficient and therefore respond with additional force. This creates a reciprocal escalation cycle.

Escalation Dynamics

Escalation occurs when conflict moves from lower-intensity forms of competition toward increasingly severe military or political confrontation (Gannon et al., 2024). It can be intentional or accidental. Intentional escalation occurs when an actor deliberately increases pressure to change an opponent's behavior. Unintentional escalation can emerge from misinterpretation,

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poor communication, battlefield accidents, or decentralized actions by proxy organizations. Research examining Iran's conflict behavior emphasizes the importance of understanding how Tehran interprets threats and how it attempts to control escalation while preserving deterrence. The problem becomes particularly acute when military operations involve multiple actors. An attack conducted by a regional armed group may trigger retaliation against Iran even when Tehran does not intend a wider conflict. Similarly, an American strike intended to deter Iran could be interpreted by Iranian decision-makers as preparation for regime-directed military action.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on deterrence theory, which explains how states seek to prevent adversaries from taking unwanted actions by threatening to impose unacceptable costs. Deterrence primarily depends on three interconnected elements: capability, credibility, and communication (Filippidou et al., 2020). Capability refers to the material ability to inflict costs on an adversary, credibility concerns whether the adversary believes that the threat will actually be carried out, and communication involves clearly conveying the conditions under which retaliation will occur. In the U.S.–Iran relationship, all three elements are complicated by the significant military asymmetry and mutual distrust between the two states. The United States possesses superior conventional military, technological, and force-projection capabilities, but Iran may question Washington's willingness to bear the political, economic, and military costs of prolonged regional conflict. Conversely, Iran has comparatively weaker conventional forces but possesses missiles, drones, maritime capabilities, and regional networks that allow it to impose significant costs through asymmetric means. As a result, deterrence between the two states is not based solely on conventional military strength but on the ability of each side to demonstrate credible and sustainable costs while communicating clear limits to escalation.

Security Dilemma

The security dilemma describes a situation in which measures taken by one state to improve its own security are perceived as threatening by another state, leading the second state to adopt countermeasures that further increase tensions. In the U.S.–Iran relationship, increased U.S. military deployments and force protection measures may be perceived by Iran as evidence of encirclement or preparation for military action, encouraging Tehran to strengthen its missile, drone, maritime, and regional capabilities (Imam et al., 2026). These Iranian responses can, in turn, reinforce U.S. perceptions of an Iranian threat and encourage additional military deployments or defensive measures. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity in which actions intended to enhance deterrence can unintentionally increase the likelihood of escalation. Importantly, neither side necessarily needs to seek unlimited or full-scale war for this cycle to continue, because mutual suspicion, incomplete information, and uncertainty about intentions can sustain confrontation even when both actors prefer to avoid a wider conflict.

Escalation Theory

Escalation theory explains how conflicts can gradually move from low-intensity political and economic pressure toward increasingly costly military confrontation (Brecher et al., 1996). In the

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U.S.–Iran context, escalation may develop through a sequence beginning with diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions, followed by military signaling, limited strikes, proxy attacks, direct military action, and attacks on strategic, maritime, energy, or regional military infrastructure, potentially culminating in large-scale regional warfare. The central danger is that each actor may believe it can take a limited step to demonstrate resolve and then stop, while the opponent may interpret that action as a serious threat and respond at an even higher level. This creates a ratcheting effect, in which each successive response reduces the possibility of returning to the previous level of confrontation. Escalation theory therefore highlights the importance of clear communication, proportional responses, crisis-management mechanisms, and diplomatic off-ramps to prevent limited incidents from developing into uncontrolled regional conflict.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to examine the dynamics of military escalation, deterrence, and regional stability in the U.S.–Iran confrontation. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on understanding strategic behavior, threat perceptions, decision-making, escalation patterns, and interactions among military, economic, nuclear, maritime, and regional factors rather than estimating a numerical probability of war (Feng et al., 2007). The research integrates concepts from international relations and security studies with an analysis of contemporary developments in U.S.–Iran relations. The study relies exclusively on secondary data and does not involve primary interviews, surveys, field observations, or classified military information. The research process involved identifying relevant literature, organizing evidence according to predefined analytical dimensions, comparing the strategic behavior of the United States and Iran, and interpreting the findings through deterrence theory, security-dilemma theory, and escalation theory.

Data Sources

The study used information from multiple categories of secondary sources to ensure broad coverage of the political, military, economic, nuclear, maritime, and regional dimensions of the conflict (Pickering et al., 2009). The primary sources of evidence included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, scholarly reports, policy papers, conflict-monitoring databases, government and international-organization publications, and reputable news organizations. Academic literature was used primarily to establish the theoretical foundations of deterrence, asymmetric warfare, security dilemmas, and escalation. Policy and strategic studies were examined to understand Iranian military doctrine, U.S. regional strategy, missile and drone capabilities, proxy networks, sanctions, and military deployments. Contemporary reporting and conflict-monitoring assessments were used to identify recent developments, including military exchanges, maritime incidents, diplomatic initiatives, sanctions, and regional responses. Particular attention was given to recent sources when assessing the 2026 escalation environment, while established scholarly sources were retained for historical and theoretical interpretation. Information from individual reports was compared with evidence from other reputable sources where possible to reduce dependence on a single source and improve analytical reliability.

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Source Selection and Evaluation

Sources were selected according to their relevance, credibility, recency, and analytical value. Peer-reviewed academic publications and established theoretical works were prioritized for explaining long-term concepts and historical patterns (**De Falco etal.,2024)**. For contemporary developments, preference was given to authoritative institutional sources, official government or international-organization reports, recognized conflict-monitoring organizations, and established international news agencies. Sources were excluded when they lacked identifiable authorship, relied primarily on unverified claims, or provided insufficient evidence for major factual assertions. Because the contemporary U.S.–Iran conflict is rapidly evolving, recent information was treated cautiously and cross-checked where feasible. Historical and theoretical claims were assessed against established academic literature, whereas current military and diplomatic developments were examined using more recent reporting and policy assessments. This combination allowed the study to distinguish between relatively established background knowledge and rapidly changing contemporary events.

Analytical Framework

The collected evidence was organized into five interconnected analytical dimensions: military escalation, deterrence and compellence, asymmetric warfare, regional spillover, and de-escalation mechanisms (**Yusuf et al., 2026)**. Military escalation included direct strikes, military deployments, missile and drone attacks, attacks on military installations, and the potential targeting of critical infrastructure. Deterrence and compellence focused on the ability of the United States and Iran to threaten costs, communicate resolve, influence adversary behavior, and prevent or compel specific actions. Asymmetric warfare covered Iran's missile and drone capabilities, maritime strategies, regional armed groups, and other methods through which a militarily weaker actor can impose costs on a stronger opponent. Regional spillover examined how developments involving Iran and the United States could affect Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Israel, maritime routes, energy markets, and wider regional security. Finally, de-escalation mechanisms examined crisis communication, maritime deconfliction, nuclear diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and regional dialogue as potential mechanisms for reducing escalation.

Application of Theoretical Concepts

The empirical evidence was interpreted through three complementary theoretical perspectives: deterrence theory, security-dilemma theory, and escalation theory. Deterrence theory was used to assess the roles of capability, credibility, communication, and perceived costs in U.S.–Iran strategic interaction. Security-dilemma theory was applied to examine how defensive measures by one actor may increase threat perceptions and countermeasures by the other. Escalation theory was used to analyze how confrontation can move progressively from diplomatic and economic pressure toward military signaling, limited strikes, proxy attacks, direct military confrontation, maritime disruption, and potentially broader regional warfare. Applying these perspectives together enabled the study to examine not only why the two states seek to deter each other but also why deterrence may become unstable and generate unintended escalation.

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Comparative Analysis of Deterrence Capabilities

A comparative analytical framework was used to assess the principal deterrence characteristics of the United States and Iran. The comparison considered conventional military power, long-range strike capabilities, missile and drone systems, maritime leverage, economic coercion, regional networks, escalation tolerance, and strategic vulnerabilities. Rather than treating military power as a single variable, the analysis examined how different forms of power generate different types of deterrence. The United States was assessed primarily in terms of conventional superiority, global force projection, naval capabilities, intelligence, economic influence, and regional alliances, whereas Iran was examined in relation to asymmetric capabilities, geographical advantages, missile and drone systems, maritime leverage, and regional networks. This approach allowed the study to identify areas of both asymmetry and mutual vulnerability.

Analysis of Escalation Pathways

The study further identified and examined the major pathways through which U.S.–Iran confrontation could escalate. These included direct military exchange, proxy escalation, maritime escalation, economic escalation, nuclear escalation, critical-infrastructure attacks, and cyber escalation. Each pathway was assessed according to its potential trigger, immediate consequence, and possible regional impact. The purpose was not to predict a specific future conflict but to identify mechanisms through which a limited incident could generate broader instability. Particular attention was given to the Strait of Hormuz because maritime disruption can simultaneously produce military, economic, and energy-security consequences beyond the immediate conflict zone.

Regional Spillover Analysis

Regional spillover was examined by considering how U.S.–Iran confrontation affects actors and strategic environments beyond the two principal states. The analysis considered the security interests of Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Israel, and other regional actors, with particular emphasis on military bases, energy infrastructure, maritime routes, proxy networks, and trade relationships. The study examined how regional actors can become either targets, participants, intermediaries, or potential stabilizing actors. This approach recognizes that the consequences of U.S.–Iran confrontation are not geographically restricted to Iranian or U.S. territory but can extend across interconnected regional security systems.

Analysis of De-escalation Mechanisms

The final analytical stage focused on mechanisms that could reduce the likelihood of uncontrolled escalation. These included crisis communication channels, military-to-military deconfliction, maritime navigation arrangements, nuclear diplomacy, regional confidence-building measures, and third-party mediation. These mechanisms were assessed according to

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their potential ability to reduce uncertainty, improve communication, establish predictable boundaries, and provide diplomatic alternatives to retaliation. The analysis particularly considered whether limited, issue-specific agreements could be more achievable than a comprehensive settlement of the entire U.S.–Iran strategic rivalry.

Data Interpretation and Synthesis

After organizing the evidence across the five analytical dimensions, the findings were compared and synthesized to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and escalation mechanisms (**Hasan et al., 2025**). Evidence from different source categories was interpreted collectively rather than treating individual events as isolated incidents. The analysis examined how military pressure could interact with economic sanctions, how asymmetric capabilities could influence deterrence, how proxy activity could produce regional spillover, and how maritime confrontation could connect regional conflict with global economic security. The results were then linked back to the theoretical framework to determine whether the observed U.S.–Iran interaction was consistent with the expectations of deterrence, security-dilemma, and escalation theories.

Ethical Considerations

As the study uses publicly available secondary information and does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or personally identifiable information, no direct risks to research participants were involved. Sources were used for academic analysis, and claims were interpreted within their documented context. Particular care was taken to distinguish verified information from analytical assessments and to avoid presenting uncertain or disputed developments as established facts. The methodology therefore emphasizes transparency, source evaluation, and cautious interpretation of rapidly changing military and political developments.

Results

Military Escalation and Strategic Interaction

The qualitative analysis identified military escalation as the first and most visible dimension of the U.S.–Iran confrontation (Table 1). The evidence indicates that escalation has not developed solely through h large-scale direct military engagements; rather, it has emerged through a combination of military deployments, missile and drone attacks, strikes against military infrastructure, force-protection measures, and reciprocal military signaling. These interactions demonstrate a pattern in which actions intended to strengthen deterrence can simultaneously increase the adversary's perception of threat. The comparative analysis revealed a pronounced asymmetry in conventional military capabilities. The United States possesses substantially greater airpower, naval capabilities, intelligence and surveillance systems, precision-strike capacity, logistical resources, and force-projection capabilities. Iran, in contrast, has comparatively weaker conventional forces but has developed missile and drone capabilities, maritime instruments, geographically advantageous positioning, and regional networks that enable it to impose costs on U.S. forces and partners.

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This asymmetry means that military superiority does not automatically produce escalation dominance. The United States may possess the ability to conduct highly sophisticated military operations, but Iran retains the capacity to create vulnerabilities through dispersed and asymmetric means. Consequently, the strategic interaction is characterized by a combination of U.S. conventional superiority and Iranian asymmetric denial capabilities.

Table 1: Comparative military and deterrence characteristics of Iran and the United States

Deterrence dimension	United States	Iran	Strategic implication
Conventional military power	Very high air, naval, intelligence, and expeditionary capabilities	Lower conventional capability	Strong U.S. conventional advantage
Long-range strike	Advanced precision-strike and global force-projection capabilities	Significant regional missile capability	Creates mutual vulnerability
Missiles and drones	Advanced offensive and defensive systems	Extensive ballistic missile and drone capabilities	Increases cost of regional military operations
Maritime capability	Powerful naval forces and sustained regional deployment	Geographic advantage and asymmetric maritime capabilities	Creates persistent maritime competition
Economic leverage	Very high financial and sanctions capacity	More limited economic leverage	U.S. coercive advantage
Regional networks	Formal alliances and security partnerships	Regional armed groups and strategic partners	Expands confrontation geographically
Strategic vulnerability	Forward bases and deployed forces may become targets	Military and critical infrastructure vulnerable to superior strikes	Produces reciprocal vulnerability

The findings further indicate that forward deployment has a dual effect. The presence of U.S. forces in the region strengthens deterrence by demonstrating military readiness and the ability to respond rapidly. At the same time, concentrated military bases and forward-deployed personnel create identifiable targets for missiles, drones, cyber operations, and attacks by regional armed groups. Thus, force deployment simultaneously increases deterrence credibility and target exposure. From the perspective of escalation theory, the interaction demonstrates a ratcheting process. A military deployment can produce Iranian counter-deployment; Iranian missile or drone activity can produce U.S. defensive or offensive responses; and subsequent retaliation can generate additional military signaling. The result is a cycle in which each successive action potentially raises the intensity of confrontation.

Deterrence, Compellence, and Asymmetric Warfare

The second analytical dimension examined the effectiveness of deterrence and coercive strategies. The findings indicate that deterrence remained important in constraining the behavior of both sides, but it did not eliminate escalation. Both Iran and the United States appeared to retain incentives to avoid an unrestricted regional war while simultaneously attempting to

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demonstrate that continued pressure would carry unacceptable costs. The United States primarily relied on conventional deterrence, extended deterrence, economic coercion, military deployments, and precision-strike capabilities. Iran relied more heavily on asymmetric deterrence, including ballistic missiles, drones, maritime capabilities, regional armed groups, and the ability to threaten military and strategic infrastructure. The results therefore demonstrate that deterrence in the U.S.–Iran confrontation is multidimensional rather than purely conventional (Table 2).

Table 2: Major forms of deterrence identified in the analysis

Form of deterrence	United States	Iran	Principal effect
Conventional deterrence	Strong	Limited relative to the U.S.	U.S. military advantage
Punishment	Precision strikes and economic sanctions	Missile, drone, maritime, and regional retaliation	Raises expected costs
Denial	Air defense, naval protection, force protection	Dispersal, missiles, drones, asymmetric tactics	Reduces adversary freedom of action
Economic coercion	Extensive sanctions and financial restrictions	Limited economic leverage	Creates strong U.S. coercive advantage
Maritime deterrence	Naval presence and maritime protection	Geographic leverage and asymmetric maritime capabilities	Creates reciprocal maritime risks
Regional deterrence	Alliances and security partnerships	Regional armed groups and partners	Extends deterrence beyond national territory

An important finding was the existence of a deterrence paradox. Measures designed to prevent escalation can sometimes generate additional escalation. For example, increased U.S. military deployments may reassure regional partners but may simultaneously be interpreted by Iran as preparation for offensive action. Similarly, Iranian missile deployments and maritime activities may be intended to demonstrate retaliatory capability but can be interpreted by the United States as preparations for attack. The results also indicate that economic coercion has a mixed effect. Sanctions can reduce economic resources and increase the costs of Iran's military and regional activities. However, sustained economic pressure can also encourage adaptation, alternative trading arrangements, and asymmetric retaliation. Consequently, sanctions may increase coercive leverage without necessarily producing political capitulation. Asymmetric warfare emerged as particularly important because it allows Iran to compensate partially for conventional military inferiority. Iran does not need to match U.S. military capabilities system-for-system. Instead, it can target vulnerabilities where U.S. power is relatively more exposed, including forward bases, maritime routes, regional infrastructure, and allied interests. This produces a form of asymmetric deterrence in which the weaker actor seeks to make military intervention sufficiently costly to discourage further escalation.

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Escalation Pathways and Nuclear–Maritime Risk

The third analytical dimension focused on the pathways through which confrontation can move from limited competition toward broader conflict (Table 3). The analysis identified seven major escalation pathways: direct military confrontation, proxy escalation, maritime escalation, economic escalation, nuclear escalation, critical-infrastructure attacks, and cyber escalation.

Table 3: Major escalation pathways identified through the qualitative analysis

Escalation pathway	Potential trigger	Immediate consequence	Potential wider consequence	Risk
Direct military exchange	Attack on military personnel, bases, or strategic targets	Retaliatory strikes	Wider interstate conflict	Very high
Proxy escalation	Attack by regional armed groups	Retaliation against groups or associated targets	Expansion across multiple theaters	Very high
Maritime escalation	Naval incident, tanker attack, mine threat, navigation dispute	Naval confrontation	Energy and shipping disruption	Very high
Economic escalation	Additional sanctions or financial restrictions	Countermeasures and economic pressure	Trade and financial instability	High
Nuclear escalation	Attack on or pressure against nuclear facilities	Nuclear signaling and heightened alertness	Proliferation pressure and regional arms competition	Very high
Critical infrastructure	Attack on energy, electricity, water, or telecommunications	Civilian and economic disruption	Humanitarian and regional instability	High
Cyber escalation	Cyberattack against government or critical infrastructure	Service disruption and retaliation	Spillover into civilian systems	High

The findings demonstrate that escalation should not be understood as a simple linear progression. Instead, different pathways can interact. For example, a military strike can lead to a proxy response, which can produce another direct military strike. Similarly, economic sanctions can coincide with cyber activity or maritime retaliation. The nuclear dimension represents one of the most sensitive escalation pathways. Military pressure against nuclear facilities may reduce particular physical capabilities, but it cannot necessarily eliminate technical knowledge, scientific expertise, or the underlying political motivations associated with nuclear development. The analysis therefore indicates that military pressure may have an unintended effect if Iranian decision-makers conclude that stronger nuclear capabilities are necessary to prevent future attacks.

The maritime dimension was also identified as particularly significant. The Strait of Hormuz connects the regional military confrontation with global energy and commercial security. Any

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serious disruption can affect shipping, insurance, energy prices, and international trade. Consequently, maritime escalation represents a pathway through which a regional military confrontation can rapidly produce consequences outside the Middle East. The analysis therefore identifies direct military confrontation, proxy escalation, maritime incidents, and nuclear-related escalation as the most strategically dangerous pathways because each can rapidly produce responses across multiple domains.

Regional Spillover, Energy Security, and Economic Stability

The fourth analytical dimension examined the consequences of U.S.–Iran confrontation for regional stability. The results indicate that the conflict cannot be understood as an isolated bilateral confrontation because military, economic, and security effects extend across the wider Middle East. Four major spillover mechanisms were identified:

1. **Threats to Gulf states and regional military facilities**
2. **Disruption of maritime commerce**
3. **Threats to energy infrastructure and supplies**
4. **Expansion of conflict into neighboring theaters**

Gulf states occupy a particularly difficult strategic position. They depend on U.S. military capabilities and security partnerships while also having geographical and economic interests in maintaining stable relations with Iran. Escalation therefore creates pressure for these states to strengthen defensive measures while simultaneously encouraging diplomatic efforts to prevent further confrontation. The Strait of Hormuz emerged from the analysis as the most important regional transmission mechanism. Its strategic importance means that maritime insecurity can produce consequences far beyond the immediate participants in the conflict. Disruption of shipping can increase transportation costs, insurance premiums, energy prices, and supply-chain uncertainty. The whole results are tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4: Regional consequences of U.S.–Iran escalation

Regional dimension	Principal effect	Wider consequence
Gulf security	Increased military alertness and defensive requirements	Greater regional militarization
Maritime security	Reduced shipping confidence and increased navigation risks	Disruption of international trade
Energy security	Threats to oil and gas transportation	Global energy-price volatility
Military bases	Increased vulnerability to missile and drone attacks	Pressure for force dispersal and resilience
Proxy networks	Expansion of indirect confrontation	Conflict spillover into neighboring states
Civilian infrastructure	Risk to electricity, water, telecommunications, and health services	Humanitarian and economic instability
Regional diplomacy	Greater demand for mediation and deconfliction	Potential strengthening of intermediary roles

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The analysis also suggests that prolonged maritime insecurity may encourage Gulf states and international actors to diversify transportation and energy routes. Such diversification can reduce vulnerability to future disruption, but it may also change established regional economic relationships. Regional spillover was particularly evident through the involvement of armed groups and partner organizations. Because actions by regional actors may be difficult to attribute precisely, an attack conducted by a non-state actor can generate uncertainty regarding responsibility. This attribution problem increases the risk of disproportionate retaliation and therefore represents an important mechanism of unintended escalation. The findings consequently demonstrate that regional stability depends not only on the behavior of Iran and the United States but also on the responses of Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Israel, and other regional actors.

De-escalation Mechanisms and Prospects for Regional Stability

The fifth analytical dimension examined mechanisms capable of interrupting the escalation cycle. The results (Table 5) indicate that military deterrence alone is insufficient for maintaining long-term regional stability. Instead, the most promising approach is a combination of credible deterrence and risk-reduction mechanisms. The analysis identified five principal stabilizing mechanisms:

- crisis communication and emergency hotlines;
- military-to-military deconfliction;
- maritime navigation and incident-management arrangements;
- nuclear diplomacy and verification mechanisms; and
- regional confidence-building and diplomatic dialogue.

Table 5: Potential de-escalation mechanisms identified by the study

Mechanism	Primary function	Expected stabilizing effect
Crisis communication	Reduce misunderstanding during emergencies	Lower probability of miscalculation
Military deconfliction	Prevent unintended military encounters	Reduce accidental escalation
Maritime arrangements	Protect commercial navigation	Reduce maritime confrontation
Nuclear diplomacy	Manage nuclear-related security concerns	Reduce incentives for nuclear escalation
Regional dialogue	Address shared security concerns	Improve regional confidence
Confidence-building measures	Establish predictable behavior	Reduce uncertainty
Third-party mediation	Provide communication channels during crises	Create diplomatic off-ramps
Critical-infrastructure protection	Reduce civilian vulnerability	Limit humanitarian consequences

The findings suggest that issue-specific agreements may be more achievable than a comprehensive settlement. The underlying strategic rivalry between Washington and Tehran involves fundamental disagreements that are unlikely to disappear quickly. Nevertheless, limited

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agreements concerning maritime navigation, military communication, nuclear verification, or protection of civilian infrastructure may reduce immediate risks without requiring the resolution of every political dispute. Crisis communication was particularly important because incomplete information is a major source of escalation. When decision-makers cannot determine whether an opponent's action is defensive or offensive, they may adopt precautionary measures that unintentionally intensify the crisis. Reliable communication channels can therefore reduce uncertainty and provide decision-makers with alternatives to immediate retaliation. Maritime deconfliction represents another practical area for risk reduction. Because commercial vessels and military forces operate within the same strategic environment, mechanisms governing navigation, communication, and incident management can prevent isolated maritime events from becoming broader military confrontations. The overall results support the concept of controlled deterrence. Under this model, credible military capabilities remain necessary to discourage aggression, but deterrence is supplemented by mechanisms that reduce miscalculation and provide pathways for de-escalation.

Conceptual Model of the Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the escalation and stabilization dynamics of U.S.–Iran strategic competition. It shows how U.S. military and economic pressure can increase Iranian threat perceptions, encouraging Iran to adopt asymmetric deterrence through missiles, proxy networks, and maritime pressure. These actions may produce regional spillover, prompting further U.S. and allied responses and increasing the risk of escalation, which can contribute to economic, humanitarian, and security instability.

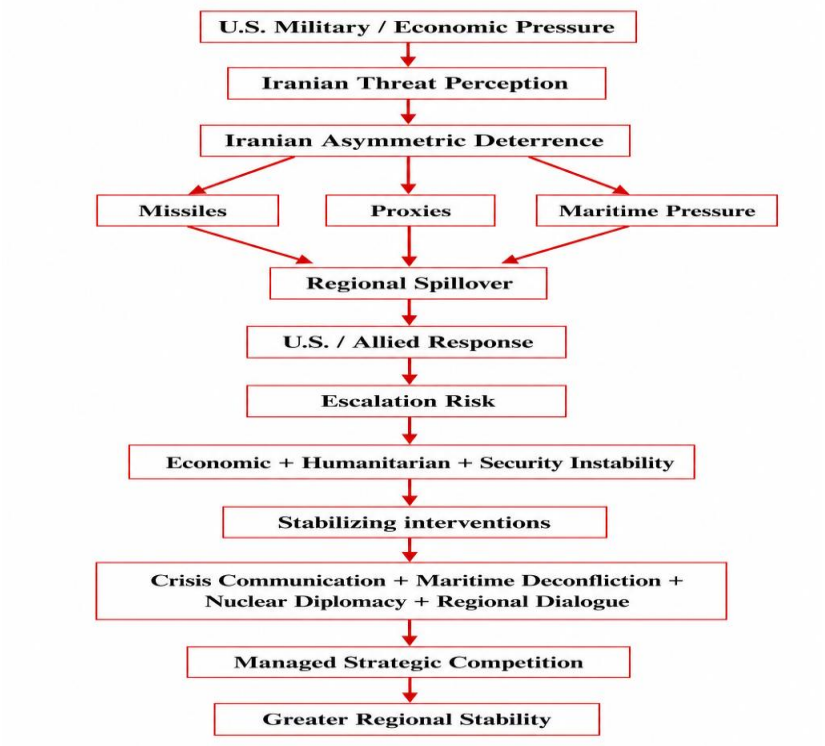

Figure 1: Conceptual pathway linking military escalation, deterrence, and regional instability.

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The framework then identifies stabilizing interventions, particularly crisis communication, maritime deconfliction, nuclear diplomacy, and regional dialogue, as mechanisms for interrupting the escalation cycle. Successful implementation of these measures can transform confrontation into managed strategic competition, ultimately contributing to greater regional stability.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the U.S.–Iran confrontation is better understood as a multidomain deterrence competition than as a conventional military rivalry between two states. Although the United States maintains a substantial advantage in conventional military power, force projection, intelligence, naval capabilities, and precision-strike capacity, Iran possesses a combination of asymmetric military capabilities, regional networks, geographical advantages, and missile and drone systems that enable it to impose high costs on a militarily superior adversary. This asymmetric structure creates a strategic environment in which conventional superiority does not necessarily translate into complete escalation dominance. Instead, both states possess different forms of leverage, producing a deterrence relationship characterized by mutual vulnerability despite considerable asymmetry in overall military power. The findings are also consistent with the central assumptions of deterrence theory, particularly the importance of credible threats, perceived costs, and uncertainty in shaping state behavior (Huth et al., 1997). Deterrence can prevent direct attacks when decision-makers believe that the anticipated costs of escalation will exceed potential gains. However, the present analysis demonstrates that deterrence can become unstable when defensive measures are interpreted as preparations for offensive action. For example, increased U.S. military deployments may be perceived by Iran as preparation for further strikes, while Iranian missile deployments, maritime activities, or support for regional armed groups may be interpreted by Washington as evidence of an offensive strategy. Such reciprocal threat perceptions contribute to a classical security dilemma in which measures intended to increase security can simultaneously generate greater insecurity.

The findings concerning U.S. forward military deployment are particularly significant. The presence of U.S. forces in the Gulf strengthens deterrence by demonstrating the capacity and willingness to respond rapidly to threats against allies and strategic interests (Siegel et al., 1997). Nevertheless, forward deployment also creates concentrated and highly visible targets for missiles, drones, cyber operations, and attacks by regional armed groups. Consequently, military presence produces a dual effect: it increases deterrence credibility while simultaneously increasing target exposure. This suggests that the effectiveness of deterrence should not be evaluated solely through the quantity of military power deployed but also through the survivability, dispersion, resilience, and defensive capacity of deployed forces. The findings further indicate that economic coercion has important but limited deterrent value when used independently. Sanctions can restrict financial resources, reduce access to international markets, and increase the economic costs associated with Iran's military and regional activities (Ianchovichina et al., 2016). However, sustained economic pressure can also generate incentives for Tehran to diversify trade relationships, develop alternative financial mechanisms, and employ asymmetric responses. Economic coercion may therefore strengthen U.S. bargaining leverage while simultaneously increasing Iranian perceptions of strategic vulnerability. This creates an important policy dilemma: sanctions can increase the cost of Iranian resistance without necessarily producing political capitulation. The effectiveness of economic coercion is

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consequently likely to depend on whether sanctions are combined with credible diplomatic incentives and a realistic pathway toward de-escalation.

The Strait of Hormuz represents perhaps the clearest example of asymmetric strategic leverage. Iran's geographical position gives it the ability to threaten maritime activity in a strategically important waterway despite its inferior conventional military power. Even without completely closing the Strait, uncertainty surrounding maritime security can increase shipping costs, insurance premiums, rerouting pressures, and energy-market volatility. This gives Iran a form of leverage that exceeds what might otherwise be expected from its conventional military capabilities. At the same time, excessive use of maritime coercion can become counterproductive because it encourages Gulf states and international actors to diversify transportation routes, improve maritime defenses, and reduce their dependence on the Strait. Maritime coercion therefore creates a strategic paradox in which short-term leverage may generate long-term incentives for other actors to reduce their vulnerability (Pokorny et al., 2026). The maritime dimension also demonstrates the importance of regional diplomacy and confidence-building mechanisms. Recent discussions involving Iran and Oman concerning navigation arrangements illustrate how limited, issue-specific agreements can reduce immediate risks even when broader political disagreements remain unresolved. Such mechanisms are important because commercial shipping can become an unintended trigger for military escalation. A maritime incident involving a tanker, naval vessel, or suspected mine could rapidly produce attribution disputes and demands for retaliation. Establishing communication channels and navigation arrangements can therefore create a degree of separation between commercial maritime activity and military confrontation. This finding supports the broader argument that risk reduction does not necessarily require a comprehensive political settlement.

Another major finding concerns regional spillover. The U.S.–Iran confrontation has consequences extending beyond the bilateral relationship because both countries operate within a complex regional security environment. Iran maintains relationships with armed groups and regional partners, while the United States maintains extensive alliances and security partnerships (Tabatabai et al., 2021). Consequently, a confrontation initiated in one location can generate responses across multiple theaters. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, the Gulf states, and the Red Sea can all be affected by developments originating elsewhere. This distributed structure makes attribution more difficult and increases the probability that a localized incident will generate broader escalation. The position of the Gulf states further demonstrates the complexity of regional security. These states depend substantially on U.S. security capabilities while simultaneously maintaining significant economic and geographical interests in stable relations with Iran. An extended confrontation threatens energy infrastructure, maritime commerce, investment, tourism, financial systems, and critical infrastructure. Gulf states therefore have incentives to strengthen defensive capabilities while also supporting diplomatic mechanisms capable of preventing further escalation. This balancing behavior suggests that regional actors are not merely passive recipients of U.S.–Iran rivalry; they can potentially become important intermediaries in regional de-escalation. The findings also have important implications for nuclear deterrence. Military pressure against Iranian nuclear infrastructure may temporarily reduce specific capabilities, but it cannot eliminate technical knowledge, scientific expertise, or the underlying security motivations associated with Iran's nuclear program (Bluth et al., 2025). Indeed, if Iranian decision-makers perceive military attacks as evidence that conventional capabilities are insufficient to guarantee national security, pressure could increase the perceived

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strategic value of nuclear capabilities. This produces an important paradox: military action intended to prevent nuclear proliferation could, under certain conditions, increase incentives for nuclear hedging or accelerated nuclear development. Nuclear diplomacy therefore remains essential even when military deterrence is maintained.

The analysis suggests that the most dangerous escalation pathways are those involving direct military exchanges, proxy attacks, maritime incidents, and nuclear-related confrontations. These pathways can rapidly move from limited incidents to broader retaliation. Economic pressure, cyber operations, and attacks on critical infrastructure can also serve as escalation catalysts. In particular, attacks against energy, electricity, water, telecommunications, or other civilian infrastructure could transform a military confrontation into a humanitarian crisis. The interconnected nature of these pathways means that escalation should not be viewed as a linear process. Rather, it is better understood as a dynamic system in which developments in one domain can trigger reactions across several others. Taken together, these findings support the concept of controlled deterrence. Traditional deterrence focuses heavily on the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary. The present analysis suggests that this approach is insufficient for a confrontation characterized by multiple actors, indirect warfare, maritime vulnerabilities, economic coercion, and nuclear risks. Effective deterrence must also incorporate mechanisms that prevent miscalculation and provide opportunities for de-escalation. In this sense, deterrence should combine credible defensive capabilities with crisis communication, military deconfliction, maritime security arrangements, nuclear verification, and regional dialogue. The broader implication is that military superiority alone cannot guarantee regional stability. The United States possesses greater conventional capabilities, but Iran's asymmetric capabilities allow it to impose costs below the threshold of conventional war. Conversely, Iran's ability to impose costs does not mean that it can achieve strategic victory through sustained escalation without facing severe economic, military, and political consequences. Both sides therefore face incentives to avoid uncontrolled escalation while maintaining sufficient capabilities to preserve bargaining power. The most sustainable strategic environment would consequently be one in which both sides retain credible deterrence while simultaneously reducing opportunities for accidental or uncontrolled escalation.

Future Recommendations

Future research should move beyond predominantly qualitative assessments and develop empirically measurable models of U.S.–Iran deterrence and escalation. Researchers could construct longitudinal datasets covering military deployments, missile and drone attacks, sanctions, maritime incidents, proxy activity, diplomatic engagements, and escalation outcomes. Such datasets would allow researchers to identify whether specific forms of coercion consistently increase or decrease the probability of military escalation. Future studies should also examine the relationship between economic sanctions and asymmetric retaliation using quantitative approaches. Rather than assessing sanctions only through economic indicators, future research should investigate whether increases in economic pressure are systematically associated with changes in missile attacks, maritime incidents, cyber operations, or proxy activity. This would provide stronger evidence regarding whether sanctions function primarily as deterrence mechanisms or whether they can become drivers of counter-escalation.

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A second important research direction is the development of maritime-risk models for the Strait of Hormuz. Future studies could integrate shipping data, tanker movements, maritime incidents, energy prices, insurance costs, and military deployments to evaluate how changes in perceived maritime risk affect international energy markets. Scenario-based modelling could also assess the consequences of partial disruption, temporary closure, or negotiated navigation arrangements. Future research should additionally investigate regional perspectives on deterrence rather than focusing exclusively on Washington and Tehran. Gulf states, Iraq, Oman, Israel, Türkiye, and other regional actors have different threat perceptions and strategic interests. Comparative studies examining how these actors interpret U.S. military presence, Iranian regional influence, and maritime security would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the regional security dilemma.

Greater attention should also be given to cyber and critical-infrastructure escalation. Future research could examine how cyberattacks against electricity grids, telecommunications, financial institutions, energy infrastructure, and water systems might interact with conventional military escalation. Because attribution in cyberspace is often uncertain, studies should particularly examine whether ambiguous cyber incidents increase the probability of miscalculation and inappropriate retaliation.

Another important area for future research is nuclear escalation and deterrence stability. Future studies should investigate how military strikes, sanctions, diplomatic negotiations, nuclear inspections, and security guarantees affect Iran's incentives regarding nuclear development. Game-theoretical and scenario-based approaches could be particularly useful for identifying conditions under which nuclear diplomacy is more effective than coercive pressure. Future policy-oriented research should evaluate the effectiveness of regional confidence-building mechanisms. Particular attention should be given to maritime hotlines, military-to-military communication, advance notification of exercises, incident-at-sea agreements, and third-party mediation. The role of Oman and other regional intermediaries in facilitating limited agreements deserves systematic investigation because issue-specific arrangements may be more achievable than comprehensive political settlements.

Finally, future studies should develop an integrated U.S.–Iran escalation-risk index incorporating military, economic, maritime, nuclear, proxy, cyber, and humanitarian indicators. Such an index could provide policymakers with an early-warning mechanism for identifying periods of elevated escalation risk. Combining quantitative indicators with expert assessments and scenario modelling could help policymakers distinguish between routine deterrence signaling and developments that indicate a genuine transition toward uncontrolled conflict.

Conclusion

The military confrontation between Iran and the United States represents one of the most significant threats to Middle Eastern stability. The crisis demonstrates that military superiority alone cannot guarantee strategic stability. The United States possesses overwhelming conventional military capabilities, while Iran has developed asymmetric mechanisms capable of imposing substantial military, economic, and political costs. The central strategic challenge is therefore not simply deterrence but controlled deterrence. Recent developments show that military confrontation has already generated consequences extending beyond the immediate

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U.S.–Iran relationship. Maritime security, energy markets, regional armed groups, Gulf security, and international diplomacy have all been affected. The continuing uncertainty surrounding the Strait of Hormuz illustrates how a bilateral conflict can rapidly become a global economic security problem. The analysis further demonstrates that escalation can become self-reinforcing. U.S. military pressure may strengthen Iranian incentives for asymmetric retaliation; Iranian retaliation may strengthen U.S. incentives for additional military action. This cycle creates a classic security dilemma in which measures intended to increase national security can decrease collective regional security.

A sustainable solution therefore requires a transition from deterrence through punishment toward deterrence combined with risk reduction. Military capabilities remain necessary because the absence of credible deterrence could encourage aggression. However, military power must be accompanied by communication, diplomacy, maritime confidence-building measures, nuclear risk reduction, and regional security arrangements. The ultimate objective should not be the elimination of deterrence but its transformation into a stabilizing instrument. Effective deterrence should make large-scale war less likely, preserve channels for negotiation, protect civilian infrastructure, and provide both sides with a politically acceptable pathway away from escalation. The future of regional stability will consequently depend on whether Iran, the United States, and their regional partners can move from a cycle of retaliation toward a system of managed competition. Without such a transition, the greatest danger may not be a deliberate decision to begin a major regional war, but an accumulation of limited military actions that gradually removes the ability of decision-makers to control escalation.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. The study is based exclusively on publicly available secondary sources and does not involve human participants, animals, or primary data collection.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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Authors' Contributions

The author conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, analyzed the available evidence, developed the theoretical framework, and prepared the manuscript.

Data Availability

No primary dataset was generated during this study. The analysis is based on publicly available academic, policy, and secondary sources cited in the manuscript.

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