

THE U.S. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND THE PROSPECT OF WAR WITH IRAN

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ABSTRACT

For U.S. policymakers, Iran's growing regional influence, backings of proxy networks and advanced nuclear and missile programs are seen as key issues threatening regional stability and international security. This has fostered a tension between two states, such that when one side takes defensive measures, the other side will view it as a threat and escalation is more likely. The article examines the qualitative analytical assessment of risk for direct confrontation, in which the secondary data collected from policy reports, scholarly publications and strategic studies, were analyzed. The study pinpoints why the United States requires a combination of military deterrence, economic sanctions, alliance building and diplomatic engagement more than ever as components of its strategic goals. Additional tensions continue to mount stemming from regional uncertainty and instability, proxy wars and nuclear issue. Tensions can quickly become a major conflict, as these successive and coordinated attacks against military sites in Iran demonstrate, and have far-reaching implications for security and energy markets. Indeed the US-Iranian conflict that is currently evolving, its regional and global implications are a high risk scenario, driven by geopolitical competition, miscalculation and lack of effectiveness of diplomatic efforts. The findings of this study contribute to the current debate on the concept of strategic deterrence within the context of regional stability and conflict prevention, and provide policy makers, academics and security analysts interested in the future course of the Middle East security landscape with insights for its conceptualization.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran... relations, strategic. priorities, conflict,.. Escalation, Diplomacy,.. Regional... stability.

Introduction

In recent years, the U.S.-Iran ties have turned into one of the most significant flashpoints in international politics, defined by a combination of strategic interests, regional security concerns and frequent spirals of escalation. The U.S. foreign policy towards Iran over the course of the post-World War II period was driven by wider regional and geopolitical considerations, such as containment of Soviet influence in the Cold War era, energy security in the Persian Gulf, and

stability in a geopolitically vital area for global sea trade (Partowazar & Soltani, 2016). In recent decades, however, the partnership between the two countries has turned into a rivalry and mutual confrontation, with frequent danger of combat and conflict. Longstanding strategic interests in the region have been at the heart of America's policy on Iran. They involve ensuring freedom of navigation through vital maritime choke points, including the Strait of Hormuz, which is a major shipping route for much of the

world's oil supplies, and preventing any attacks on the United States' allies and interests in the Middle East (Reuters, 2026). Washington's commitment to maintaining access to energy supplies and exerting power to thwart alleged Iranian aggression is evident in the U.S. Navy's deployment in the Gulf and the installation of sophisticated missile defence systems. These geopolitical demands are complemented by the constant threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially as it pertains to Iran's nuclear programme – a threat that has threatened to pull Washington and Tehran into direct conflict at times (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Yet, the situation is such that it has become clear that the tension between the two has reached a new level of conflict in recent times, despite the decades of disagreement. The United States conducted major military offensives targeting Iranian targets in early 2026, including major operations on Kharg Island, a key oil export terminal (Barron's, 2026), as part of its strategy to weaken Iran's military forces. Responding to the attacks, Iran has responded with counterattacks and threats to disrupt oil transportation through the Strait of Hormuz, thereby contributing to a spike in oil prices and global security concerns (The Guardian, 2026). These events are not isolated incidents but warnings of the possibility of events being repeated in the future as sustained armed conflict evolves due to strategic competition and conflicting national interests.

Purpose of study

War is a phenomenon that can be discussed in strictly military terms, but must be discussed in the framework of other strategic priorities and historical grievances. Iran's leadership routinely portrays U.S. moves as a threat to its national sovereignty and an imperialist move, whereas U.S. officials are convinced that pressure and military deterrence are necessary measures for regional deterrence and safeguarding global economic stability (Al Jazeera, 2025). This allows a lack of confidence to settle in between both parties, a continuous cycle of escalation and a constant threat of a smaller conflict becoming larger and leading to humanitarian and geo-

political consequences. To investigate this in the historical context and with the confrontational trend both of strategic priorities in the United States and the prospect of war against Iran are certain to take, is important. In this study, I will look at how the United States' policy in Iran has developed along the way, the strategic concerns that fuel the bilateral confrontation, and the forces that have made the United States and Iran consider going to war. Historical analysis, developments and policy perspective are combined in this study in order to give an overall perspective on the reasons of the relationship between the U.S. and Iran being so volatile and consequential in the emerging geopolitics of the world.

U.S.-Iran Strategic Priorities and Geopolitical Interests in Iran

For decades, the strategic ties between the United States and Iran have been a central topic in Middle East and international relations studies. U.S. strategic policies regarding Iran have passed through several stages, from Cold War partnership to revolutionary opposition to the regime, from the nuclear distraction to the regional rivalry (Korshenko, A. 2025). Scientists usually view the development from three perspectives: geopolitical interests, security interests, and ideological differences, which have all played a part in a series of episodes of tension and escalation.

U.S. Geopolitical Interests in Iran

More broadly, geopolitical factors have influenced U.S. policy throughout this period—even since the beginning of formal U.S. diplomacy. A pivotal priority for the U.S. has been the stability and containment of rival powers (Naji, S., & Jawan, J. A. 2011). Washington saw Iran as a major ally in its containment policy against the Soviets in the Middle East, as a part of its Cold War policy. The United States entered the Iranian scene in a significant way only after World War II, but the perception of the strategic position and resourcefulness of Iran caused the United States to entrust itself into Iranian affairs quickly.

(Turner, M., & Kühn, F. P. 2019) Iran was a strategic location, close to the Soviet Union and vital oil routes, and was a western ally.

Global energy security and the security of world oil supplies have been another longstanding strategic interest. The Persian Gulf region, including Iran, is home to a large portion of the world's oil reserves, and the Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's marine chokepoints (Barnes, J., & Jaffe, A. M.). 2006). Free navigation and access to energy resources have been issues that have remained at the heart of U.S. Middle East policy, scholars write. The analysis by Diego Pagliarulo shows how the notion of energy security and ideology increasingly became important in American strategic priorities in the region, representing a mix of realpolitik and normative policy motivations (Pagliarulo, 2015).

One line of thinking in the scholarship sees the U.S. push to keep Iran from controlling regional energy supplies as a consistent strategy. For instance, during the 2011 – 2012 Strait of Hormuz dispute, the international naval force led by the United States highlighted the intersection of energy and security in America's strategic priorities (see 2011 – 2012 Strait of Hormuz dispute, 2026). These developments have again underscored this aspect, particularly as the U.S. has called on allies to ensure security in the strait amid conflict and disruption in global oil supplies. These fears are reflected in the unprecedented release of strategic petroleum reserves in response to supply disruptions caused by the war in 2026 (IEA announces, 2026).

U.S. Security Priorities and Containment Strategies

Regional deterrence, countering proliferation and alliance systems are also U.S. strategic priorities. One of the main themes in the literature is the unrelenting attempts of Washington to stop Iran from gaining the capacity to produce nuclear weapons. Diplomatic diplomacy that led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a time when U.S. policy veered towards negotiated security guarantees and compliance incentive structures. The scholars,

including (Issa, C. M. E.2017), included. The U.S. has been "ambivalent" about Iran's regional actions, with a policy that has been "oscillating" between "containment" and "attempts at coexistence" (2017).

Following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran increased its nuclear efforts and they have again caused a strategic concern in the U.S. policy circles. Iran's rapidly developed nuclear capabilities pose a direct threat to the U.S. goals of containing non-proliferation and regional security systems (Marges, D. M.). 2021). . The nuclear dispute has been a central factor in U.S. strategic considerations and has consistently been a major obstacle to diplomacy and negotiations, as demonstrated by the failure of nuclear talks in 2026 to yield any progress (Reuters analysis of nuclear talks, 2026).

Moreover, Iran's backing of non-state actors and regional proxies is a potent threat to American allies and interests in the post-1979 U.S. policy framework. According to policy analysis by The Brookings Institution, U.S. policy has focused on curbing Iran's "malign activities" in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, including supporting militant groups and its influence operations (Maloney, 2023). They influence U.S. security architecture, especially in arms sales to Middle East allies and U.S. military bases around the Gulf.

The Ideological Aspects and the Struggle for Power

Ideology is part of the U.S.–IRAN strategic tensions, in addition to geopolitical and security issues. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought a radical change in Tehran's outlook in international politics and a powerful ideological element into the bilateral relationship, say scholars. But it was the U.S. that was regarded as an imperialist power in Iran, a threat to its influence in the region, by its revolutionary leadership. This theological conflict had been hot subjects in scholarship interest, involving the interpretation of Iran's actions within the framework of the revolutionary ideology (Maloney, 2023).

The ideological dynamic also influenced U.S. decision-making. American policymakers often described Iran as a “rogue state” whose perspectives and attitudes were starkly different from the international order, which they viewed as established and legitimate. American policymakers frequently referred to Iran as a “rogue state” whose worldview was very different from the majority of the international community, considered legitimate and established. Ideological perceptions (such as those on regime type, governance legitimacy, or human rights) often are mentioned in the literature as being intertwined with strategic interests in shaping policy in the United States. For some, this ideological framing obscures the more basic realist interpretations of American strategy (Pagliarulo, 2015).

Strategic Rivalry in Regional Multi-Axis Competition

There has been a growing line of scholarship that seeks to examine U.S.-Iran relations in the context of a wider strategic competition between the two powers and regional players, as well as changing great power dynamics. Cordesman and D'Amato's previous study of strategic competition, for instance, identifies intersections between energy, economic, sanctions and nuclear concerns as U.S.-Iran rivalry focus points (Cordesman & D'Amato, 2011). The U.S. interests have entered Tehran's sphere of influence, but its push into its proxy networks and militia groups has added to the growing strategic rivalry. Indeed, U.S. containment policies regarding Iran's regional adventurism have reinforced the perception of Iranian feelings of hostility toward the U.S. and created feedback loops that further contribute to the rivalry (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018).

U.S. – Iran relations fall into the general context of a multi axis strategic rivalry involving proxy warfare and fighting in conflict areas such as Iraq and Syria. According to the post-2003 research on Iraq, the U.S. invasion of that nation brought a few unfortunate side effects: it increased Tehran's strategic space—the influence that it had and the way it competed (Cordesman et al.,

2011). These academic analyses highlight the need to analyze the U.S.-Iran tensions within the framework of a connected regional geopolitics.

Economic Dimensions: Sanctions and Strategic Pressure.

Another thread of the literature has to do with the way economic instruments have been part of the U.S. strategic agenda. Starting from 2018, the U.S. sanctions took a new direction whereby they were designed to cause maximum damage to Iran and to create pressure on it to shift its strategic trajectory and to discontinue its financing of regional proxies. The effects of the sanctions on Iran have been studied and an important point is that the domestic political and strategic games in Tehran have become more complicated due to the economic isolation. Some scholars see these “long-term institutional and economic” impacts as an reinforcement of confrontation and not a compulsion for policy changes.

Contemporary Dynamics and Future Trajectories

The escalation of military violence in 2026 and strategic issues like the Strait of Hormuz crisis highlight how U.S. and Iranian strategic priorities continue to influence the real world outcomes. Pursuing a policy to weaken threats to U.S. interests in states like Iran, by striking military and nuclear facilities, indicates a strategy that would target Iran's attempt to deter U.S. military involvement in the country and to safeguard its strategic routes (CFR timeline, 2026).

Across various sectors, future U.S.-Iran relations will be marked by strategic competition, especially in light of a shifting global power landscape, an increasingly volatile oil market, and new regional relationships. With the strategic balancing act between deterrence and coercion, as well as diplomatic maneuvering, proxy wars, economic sanctions and more, strategic engagements in the future will be influenced by these factors (CSIS strategic evaluations, 2011).

Analysis and discussion

A series of dynamic considerations including strategic priorities, security concerns and strategic escalation are responsible for the current outlook of conflict between the United States and Iran. The U.S.-Iran relationship has never been in a state of harmony since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the subsequent rupture in relations between the two countries, but the recent developments in the strategic interests of both sides in 2025–2026 have increased the likelihood of it going into open conflict (Iran–United States relations, n.d.; 2025–2026 Iran–United States negotiations, 2026).

The Key Domestic and International Factors that Influence the U.S. Policy

One of the main concerns of the United States in its policy towards Iran is energy security and the security of energy and maritime trade routes, including the Strait of Hormuz. The strait is a key chokepoint, with almost a fifth of the world's oil passing through, and therefore plays a key role not only in the U.S. economy but for the world's economy too (Fishman, E.2025). This priority is reflected in recent U.S. actions to deploy ships in an interconnected way with allies to safeguard shipping lanes. The U.S. is asking allied warships to monitor the strait, as Iran is believed to be developing the ability to launch asymmetrical attacks through drone strikes and mine laying, which could threaten shipping through the strait and energy markets. The moves reaffirm measures are a key part of U.S. regional policy, where strategic control of critical infrastructure is a mainstay (Reuters, 2026). This priority can be followed to the past U.S. policies on Iran. Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign with Iran has been going on since before the current war, aiming to force concessions from Tehran through economic sanctions, following the U.S. pullout from the 2015 nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). The aim was to limit Tehran's nuclear program and regional influence, which U.S. officials perceived as endangering regional stability and the U.S. allies' interests (Ibrahim, S. G., & Benjamin, M. O. 2019). Sanctions are mostly economic, but they are part of a wider strategic framework that

favours deterrence and containment over engagement.

The Importance of Security and Escalation

The security requirements go beyond energy to include nuclear nonproliferation, regional stability, and alliance obligations. The nuclear issue has long been a major concern of Washington's strategic agenda in Iran (Donnelly, T.). In 2005, with talks set to take place in 2025–2026, negotiations have been trying to reach a comprehensive agreement, but without success. The failure of the U.S. and allied talks and strike on Iranian nuclear sites during "Operation Epic Fury" shows how far U.S. military priorities will go when diplomacy fails (2025 United States strikes on Iranian nuclear sites, 2026). This was the realisation of the spiral of security dilemmas that can occur when any side sees the actions of the other as life-threatening. Tehran's retaliatory missile and drone barrages over the Gulf and its attempts to wreak havoc on energy and transport infrastructure in the region reflect Iran's willingness to use asymmetric forces against superior U.S. conventional forces (Touiserkani, M. (2025). Iran aims to extract a price for shipping lanes and oil markets, thereby adding to U.S. strategy challenges and domestic and allied pressures when it comes to de-escalation.

Strategic Calculus and the Prospect of War

War between the U.S. and Iran should be considered in the context of the plan. No war between the U.S. and Iran can be considered without considering the plan. In the United States, the desire to strike Iranian military and nuclear facilities is based on an assessment that offensive pressure could provide strategic benefits, including the ability to stall nuclear development or undermine the military's capability (Touiserkani, M.). 2025). But strategic experts highlight that there is no broad domestic consensus in the U.S. for an all-out ground invasion, noting the constraints on U.S. warfighting ambitions and politics (Axios interview, 2026). This is an example of U.S. strategic escalation measured down to the level of a limited military operation, which is far from

what it would look like in the event of a full-scale invasion against Tehran. By contrast, Iran is continuing to pursue its asymmetric options and external leverage in the against-nations it is pursuing. Iran is attempting to place strategic cost on the closure or disruption of the Strait of Hormuz, as well as on economic infrastructure in the wider Gulf region of which Iran is a key part; one that has an impact also on the international stage, especially in the oil market (Reuters, 2026). The strategies are predicated on the interdependence of global energy markets and put pressure on the U.S. and its allies.

Regional Implications and Global Risk

The war between America and Iran will have significant regional consequences too. Regional security architectures between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Israel and other outside nations like Russia and China influence the dynamics of the conflict. Iran's action has repercussions for world energy security, and has prompted major releases by the International Energy Agency's (IEA) strategic oil stocks to mitigate oil shocks (Gokay B. 2026). The developments in the U.S.-Iran conflict show that the conflict is not limited to the immediate theatre but is also playing out within global economic systems.

Moreover, the presence of allies, and the calculations of other great powers complicate potential solutions. Mediated diplomacy is still not a foregone conclusion, however, as it depends on the current geopolitical dynamics and willingness of outside parties to help create a compromise that would avert direct confrontation and potential disruption of energy supply, as well as escalating humanitarian costs (Mertzanis, C. 2026).

Results and Implications

The study of U.S.-Iran relations, including strategic priorities and the growing intensity of conflict, yields insights into a myriad of historical grievances, geopolitical mandates, security issues and regional considerations. Based on the literature and recent developments in 2025-2026, several important results and implications are

clear in regard to the prospect of war, regional stability and global policy implications.

1. Strategic Priorities and Factors of the Conflict

One of the main findings of the analysis is that the escalation dynamics have always been shaped by America's strategic interests: energy security, maritime control, nuclear non-proliferation and alliance maintenance. The approximately 16% of the world's oil exports passing through the Strait of Hormuz will continue to be a major concern (Youvan, D. C. 2025). As described in this AP News report (2026), energy and trade interests are an important factor in military posturing when the U.S. calls for allied naval deployments to defend shipping lanes. These priorities reflect a more strategic rather than a reactive approach to U.S. policy as they address long-term regional strategic needs that coincide with crises.

Another important finding is that the need for security, particularly with regard to Iran's nuclear program and its regional influence, increases the threat of confrontation (Ismail, M.). 2015). The nuclear negotiations that have been stalling for several years, from 2025 to 2026, and the U.S. strike on Iranian nuclear and military facilities underscore the U.S. policy of stepping up to escalate the military response if diplomatic efforts fall short. The combination of deterrence, military response, and asymmetric response, has consistently been argued as a set of circumstances that fosters a situation for a prolonged state of conflict (Cordesman & D'Amato, 2011).

2. Regional Implications and Multipolar Dynamics

The U.S.-Iran standoff has ramifications for the Middle East as a whole. The escalating conflicts between the United States and Iran recently vividly demonstrate the fragility of the existing regional security structures in the region (Richards, A. M. C. 2015). However, the threat of a disruption of the way of energy transport by Iran as well as the responses of the regional allies indicate that any military action might throw the Gulf region into chaos and therefore disrupt the worldwide energy markets (Reuters, 2026). Also

other major powers such as China and Russia could have an indirect influence on the dynamics of the conflict through economic leverage or through diplomatic support, adding to the difficulties in the resolution pathway (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018).

3. Economic and Policy Implications

The economic sanctions have been the mainstay of the U.S. strategy to contain Iran's military and nuclear ambitions. The study indicates that sanctions work, but they also contribute to the development of resistance on Iran's part and can stimulate counterproductive actions, such as asymmetric ones (like attacking maritime transportation routes, Spruk, 2026). This implies that it is not simply economic solution, and tensions could be aggravated if there is no economic solution accompanied by diplomatic or security measures. Furthermore, petroleum's availability to world markets, in turn, underscores the intertwining of regional crises and world economic security. The difficulties of the U.S. national security and foreign policy community, as well as the international community, in the wake of the consequences of conflict demand an integrated solution: deterrence, diplomacy and crisis management.

4. Implications for U.S. Policy and Conflict Management

The United States should maintain balance between its military action and diplomacy to avoid further escalation: Measured Escalation is Crucial: Measured Escalation is Crucial with respect to the balance that needs to be struck while using diplomacy in relation to military action balancing escalation for the United States as it is willing to prevent further escalation (Bukhari, S. R. H.). 2026).However, even if Iranian strategic risks are not anticipated in response to the actions taken, a tactical victory may be achieved, as in the year 2026 (AP News, 2026). Regional Alliances Matter: Co-operation with allies in the Gulf and with NATO partners is crucial to ensure free and secure use of key maritime passages as well as crisis management in the event of a conflict, underscoring the value of

multilateral engagement in conflict management (Reuters, 2026). Integrated Strategy is Needed for Long-Term Deterrence: The military, economic and diplomatic measures need to work together to limit Iran's regional and nuclear goals. The high possibility of relying on sanctions or military strikes to clear the streets alone is fraught with the risk of a prolonged confrontation without strategic tensions being addressed (Pagliarulo, D.). 2016). Global Economic Considerations: A rise in tensions in the Gulf will have immediate implications for the global energy market. Economic contingencies, such as releases from strategic petroleum reserves, should be a part of strategic planning to stabilize energy supplies during crises (AP News, 2026).

5. Prospects of Conflict and Policy Recommendations

A historical analysis, strategic planning and recent events indicate that there is still a possibility of a U.S.-Iran war, but one that is limited by mutual deterrence and global interdependence. Episodic escalation is more likely to lead to direct large-scale conflict than to lead to direct peace. There is a greater risk of direct large-scale conflict as a result of episodic escalation that is used for bargaining purposes, than direct peace. Rather, ongoing discussions, limited cooperation, and a polycentric approach to the enforcement of the rules can help decrease the likelihood of a major conflict while meeting U.S. strategic interests (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018).

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a close relationship between the strategic priorities of the United States and Iran as well as the possibility of conflict, regional dynamics of stability, and worldwide economic ramifications. Escalation dynamics are created as a result of political considerations, security concerns and differences in ideologies. Irregular conflict is not a prerequisite condition, although it is always a possibility when countries do not agree on any rules or guidelines for resolving their strategic conflicts. The lessons to be learned from literature, historical precedent and

contemporary events suggest that the risk of war can be reduced and U.S. and international interests secured by using a combination of diplomatic, economic, and deterrent measures.

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