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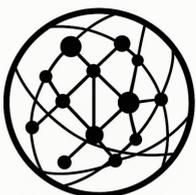
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The Global Strategic Chain Reactions of the U.S.–Iran War: East Asia as the Next Plausible Capability-Revealing Theater

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Abstract

Major-power capabilities are often misread in peacetime. Force structure, alliance reliability, industrial resilience, and escalation tolerance become fully visible only under operational stress. The Russia–Ukraine War and the ongoing U.S.–Iran war have already served as capability-revealing events, exposing the gap between peacetime expectations and wartime performance in the cases of both Russia and the United States. This paper argues that the strategic significance of the current Middle East war lies not only in its regional consequences, but also in its potential to generate cross-regional strategic strain by drawing on U.S. high-demand assets, increasing pressure on alliance coordination, and altering threat perceptions in the Western Pacific. The most plausible East Asian test is not a simple “China–Japan war,” but a broader crisis within the U.S.–China competitive system, most likely centered on Taiwan, secondarily on the South China Sea, and less likely though potentially more dangerous on the Korean Peninsula. Current indicators suggest that the most probable East Asian pathway is not immediate large-scale war, but a prolonged gray-zone or blockade-like confrontation that tests logistics, alliance cohesion, and escalation control. East Asia may therefore become the next major theater in which military capability, strategic endurance, and political resolve are revealed under real operational conditions.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran War; Strategic Chain Reactions; Cross-regional Strategic Strain; Middle East; Russia–Ukraine; East Asia; Taiwan Contingency; South China Sea; Korean Peninsula; Alliance Coordination; Blockade; Escalation Dynamics

1. Introduction

Major-power capabilities are rarely understood with precision in peacetime. Military modernization programs, alliance declarations, and budgetary aggregates reveal important trends, but they do not fully show how states perform under conditions of sustained operations, contested logistics, attrition, and political shock. In practice, capabilities become legible through conflict. Wars and crises function as stress tests that reveal not only platforms and doctrine, but also industrial depth, coalition reliability, and tolerance for strategic risk (Frederick et al., 2023).

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Over the past several years, two conflicts have already performed this capability-revealing function. First, the Russia–Ukraine War has reshaped assessments of Russian military power. It exposed important weaknesses in campaign design, coordination, and force employment, but also demonstrated Russia’s capacity for adaptation, mobilization, and sustained operations under attritional pressure. Second, the U.S.–Iran war has revealed a different operational domain: a missile-centric contest involving repeated strike waves, dense air-defense activity, distributed targeting, and cumulative escalation risk linked less to average strike performance than to the probability that a single high-impact strike reaches a politically or militarily critical node (Wu, 2026a, 2026b).

The broader implication is that the international system may be entering a phase of sequential strategic clarification. Rather than a single large-scale global war, major-power competition may unfold through a series of geographically limited but strategically revealing conflicts, each illuminating a different domain of warfare. The Russia–Ukraine War has become a test of the limits of Russian military power under prolonged attritional conditions. The U.S.–Iran war is revealing the constraints of even the most advanced military power in achieving rapid war termination through long-range strike and high-intensity regional operations. The next question is whether East Asia could become the theater that tests the operational limits of high-end maritime and aerospace warfare under conditions of major-power competition (Cancian et al., 2025; DoD, 2024; Kepe & Harold, 2025).

2. Analytical Framework: From Regional Conflict to Cross-Regional Strategic Strain

The strategic importance of the current Middle East war lies not only in battlefield outcomes, but also in resource allocation. Recent analysis suggests that even before large-scale general war, U.S. posture adjustments in the region can impose meaningful fiscal and operational burdens, particularly when force posture shifts toward more asset-intensive configurations. Related work also suggests that escalation risk in the current conflict is shaped less by average strike success than by the cumulative probability that a single high-impact strike reaches a politically or militarily critical node (Wu, 2026a, 2026b).

These dynamics imply a form of consumption-based instability. High-demand assets, interceptor inventories, ISR capacity, air-refueling support, maritime protection commitments, and political attention are absorbed over time even without decisive battlefield collapse. The significance of this pattern lies in the fact that the United States does not manage regional wars in isolation. A prolonged Middle East campaign can affect the European theater by competing for munitions, logistics, and strategic bandwidth. It can also affect East Asia by reducing flexibility in missile-defense allocation, maritime posture, and alliance coordination (Frederick et al., 2023; Schatz et al., 2025).

Recent reporting gives this dynamic practical significance. Discussion of possible Patriot redeployment from South Korea to support the Iran war illustrates how developments in one region can shape force-allocation perceptions in another. Concerns in South Korea over semiconductor materials and energy costs further suggest that the cross-regional effects of the conflict are not only military, but also industrial and psychological (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b).

This paper therefore focuses on a pattern of cross-regional strategic strain: a situation in which a state remains engaged across multiple regions while its margins of spare capacity narrow, escalation control becomes more difficult, and actors in one region begin to reinterpret developments in another as opportunity, vulnerability, or abandonment. The analytical question is not whether the United States retains global power in the abstract. It is whether overlapping crises can erode the credibility, responsiveness, and sustainability of that power faster than formal force-structure indicators would suggest.

3. Why East Asia Is the Most Likely Next Capability-Revealing Theater

Among potential theaters of major-power competition, the Western Pacific stands out because it would test the widest combination of capabilities at the highest level of operational complexity. A serious East Asian crisis would not simply reproduce the patterns observed in Ukraine or the Middle East. It would place simultaneous stress on naval survivability, long-range strike coordination, distributed basing, sealift and airlift endurance, alliance decisionmaking, civilian resilience, and escalation management under nuclear-shadow conditions (Kepe & Harold, 2025; Schatz et al., 2025).

Recent RAND and CSIS work points in the same direction. RAND's analysis of Taiwan resilience frames potential contingencies as ranging from blockade to missile strikes and invasion. RAND's work on economic deterrence evaluates allied options under a scenario in which China is perceived as likely to blockade or invade Taiwan within a short time horizon. CSIS's blockade wargame likewise treats blockade not as a peripheral possibility, but as a serious operational pathway. Taken together, these studies suggest that the most plausible East Asian test may begin not with amphibious invasion, but with a coercive campaign that exploits ambiguity, timing, and alliance hesitation (Cancian et al., 2025; Kepe & Harold, 2025; Schatz et al., 2025).

Recent Chinese official signals reinforce the interpretation that a Taiwan contingency should not be understood only in terms of a classic invasion scenario. While the 2024 DoD report highlights PLA writings on a possible "Joint Blockade Campaign," the 2026 Two Sessions point to a broader and more current emphasis on readiness, capability development, and sustained strategic competition. Reuters' summary of the 2026 NPC proceedings notes that Beijing raised defense spending by 7% and stressed improved combat readiness and faster development of advanced combat capabilities. At the same time, the published summary of the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan outline emphasized advancing military modernization while "struggling, preparing for war, and building" simultaneously, alongside improving strategic capabilities to safeguard sovereignty, security, and development interests. Read together, these signals support the view that future pressure on Taiwan may take the form of a layered coercive campaign, combining readiness, deterrence, blockade-related options, and broader military-political signaling, rather than a single, immediate full-scale assault (DoD, 2024; Reuters, 2026i; Xinhua, 2026a, 2026b).

In operational terms, an East Asian contingency would test at least four variables simultaneously: China's ability to translate military modernization, improved combat readiness, and advanced warfighting capabilities into sustained coercive operations; the survivability and flexibility of U.S. forward forces and access arrangements; the sustainability of dispersed alliance logistics across maritime space; and the willingness of U.S. allies to move from declaratory support to real conflict-phase access and operational integration. The 2026 Two Sessions reinforce the relevance of these variables by highlighting combat readiness and advanced combat capability development, while DoD's 2024 assessment continues to indicate that a Taiwan contingency could involve blockade, missile strikes, offshore-island seizures, and attempts to delay or defeat U.S. intervention. RAND's analysis further suggests that allied access decisions in such a contingency would depend heavily on domestic political and strategic calculations rather than alliance rhetoric alone (DoD, 2024; Frederick et al., 2023; Reuters, 2026i).

4. Forward Risk Assessment: East Asia War Risk Under the Shadow of the Middle East Conflict

4.1 Analytical Judgment

The most plausible East Asian risk pathway over the next 6–18 months is not sudden all-out regional war. It is a graduated coercive crisis in which gray-zone operations, maritime pressure, blockade-like measures, and alliance signaling intensify before major combat begins. This judgment follows from three indicators: Chinese doctrine and official U.S. assessments identify blockade and coercive isolation as viable options in a Taiwan contingency; South China Sea coercion continues to deepen through coast guard and militia activity; and current Middle East demands are already affecting perceptions of U.S. force allocation in Asia, including discussion of Patriot redeployment from South Korea (AMTI, 2026a, 2026b; DoD, 2024; Reuters, 2026a).

Working Paper**4.2 Most Likely Scenario: Taiwan-Centered Coercive Confrontation**

The highest-probability serious scenario is a Taiwan-centered confrontation short of immediate invasion: quarantine, blockade, inspection regimes, missile demonstrations, cyber disruption, and information operations designed to challenge alliance decisionmaking and test civilian resilience. This assessment remains consistent with PLA-related campaign concepts described in the 2024 DoD report and with recent CSIS and RAND work that treats blockade, resilience, and conflict-phase access as central to the Taiwan problem (Cancian et al., 2025; Department of Defense [DoD], 2024; Kepe & Harold, 2025). Recent Chinese official signals from the 2026 Two Sessions do not publicly articulate such a scenario in operational terms, but they do reinforce the broader policy background in which it should be understood. The summary of the draft Outline of the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan emphasizes “coordinating development and security,” sets the strengthening of the national security shield as an important objective, and links future development to stronger science and technology capacity, advanced manufacturing, and national strategic capability. Li Qiang’s related explanation of the draft outline likewise highlights the modernization of the national security system and capabilities as part of the broader planning framework. Taken together, these signals do not by themselves specify a Taiwan blockade scenario, but they are consistent with a longer-term push to strengthen the material, technological, and institutional foundations for sustained coercive competition under conditions of heightened strategic rivalry (Xinhua, 2026a, 2026b).

4.3 Second Most Likely Scenario: South China Sea Limited Clash with Alliance Spillover

The second most likely pathway is a limited maritime clash in the South China Sea involving the Philippines and China, especially around contested resupply, patrol, or law-enforcement operations. Such a clash could still remain geographically localized, but it would occur in an environment marked by intensified Chinese coast guard and maritime militia activity and tighter trilateral coordination among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. AMTI’s 2025–2026 findings point to record-high militia deployments and expanding Chinese patrol activity around Scarborough Shoal, while Reuters reporting indicates that U.S.–Philippine and U.S.–Japan–Philippines maritime cooperation has become more regularized. Under these conditions, even a limited incident could generate alliance spillover effects and become strategically revealing beyond the immediate area of contact (AMTI, 2025a, 2026a, 2026b; Reuters, 2025, 2026c).

4.4 Lower Probability but Highest Immediate Escalation Risk: Korean Peninsula

A Korean Peninsula crisis remains lower probability than either a Taiwan-centered confrontation or a South China Sea clash as the next capability-revealing event, but it would likely pose the highest immediate escalation risk once triggered. The peninsula is already highly militarized, politically compressed, and nuclear-shadowed, making it a theater in which signals that might remain manageable elsewhere can become destabilizing much more quickly. This risk is reinforced by recent developments, including North Korean ballistic missile launches in January 2026, Kim Jong Un’s February 2026 commitment to expand more powerful strategic systems, and the continuation of large-scale U.S.–South Korea Freedom Shield exercises linked to deterrence and wartime operational control transition (Lee, 2026; Reuters, 2026e, 2026g, 2026h). The possibility that U.S. missile-defense assets in South Korea could also be affected by wider Middle East demands adds a further layer of compression to the security environment (Reuters, 2026a). A peninsula crisis would therefore test not blockade endurance or alliance access, but response speed, command coordination, deterrence credibility, and escalation control under severe time pressure.

Working Paper**4.5 Why a Stand-Alone “China–Japan War” Is an Incomplete Analytical Frame**

Public discussion sometimes frames East Asian risk in bilateral terms, especially as a possible “China–Japan war.” This framing is incomplete. Japan’s security role is increasingly embedded not only in its alliance with the United States, but also in a wider pattern of cross-regional security coordination. If Japan were to expand Self-Defense Force deployments beyond East Asia, including possible missions linked to Middle Eastern contingencies, this would not necessarily make a future confrontation best understood as a stand-alone China–Japan war. Rather, it would reinforce the extent to which Japan’s security posture is shaped by alliance commitments, burden sharing, and networked strategic coordination. Recent joint military drills involving the Philippines, Japan, and the United States in the South China Sea, together with moves by South Korea and Japan to strengthen defense cooperation with U.S. support, point in the same direction. Broader concerns among U.S. Asian allies that the Iran war could weaken deterrence against China reinforce the same conclusion: East Asian security is increasingly structured through overlapping alignments rather than isolated bilateral rivalries (Frederick et al., 2023; Reuters, 2026c, 2026d, 2026f).

There is insufficient evidence to suggest that Japan would automatically enter a future conflict in the same way or at the same speed as the United States. Political thresholds, legal authorities, and operational roles would still matter. Even so, recent developments suggest that Japan’s security role is becoming more deeply embedded in alliance-based and cross-regional coordination, including tighter U.S.–Japan command integration and expanding trilateral security activity (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2026c). The more useful analytical question is therefore whether East Asia is moving toward a crisis in which the U.S.–led regional security architecture is tested against China’s coercive and military options. Framed this way, any serious confrontation involving Japan and China would still be more plausibly understood as part of a broader U.S.–China competitive framework than as an isolated bilateral conflict (DoD, 2024; Frederick et al., 2023; Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2026c).

4.6 Net Assessment

The core assessment is not that East Asia is approaching inevitable war. It is that the region is increasingly becoming the most plausible next capability-revealing theater, and that the dominant pathway is more likely to run through prolonged coercion rather than sudden general war. A Taiwan-centered coercive confrontation remains the most probable serious scenario; a limited South China Sea clash with alliance spillover remains the second most likely pathway; and a Korean Peninsula crisis remains lower in probability but potentially highest in immediate escalation cost. At the same time, East Asian risk is more plausibly understood through a broader U.S.–China competitive framework than through a stand-alone China–Japan war lens.

The Middle East conflict matters because it can compress U.S. strategic slack, complicate force allocation, and alter regional interpretations of American availability, resolve, and prioritization. These effects do not automatically produce aggression, but they can shift the perceived opportunity structure in subtle yet consequential ways. The result is a more fragile East Asian security environment in which coercive pressure, alliance signaling, and escalation risks are likely to intensify over time (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b; Schatz et al., 2025).

5. Strategic Implications

Three implications follow.

First, policymakers should avoid treating regional wars as compartmentalized. The interaction between regions may emerge through force-allocation tradeoffs, missile-defense redeployment, maritime commitments, supply-chain disruption, and alliance confidence long before it is formalized in strategy documents. Recent discussion of possible Patriot redeployment from South

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Korea to support the Iran war illustrates how a Middle Eastern contingency can immediately affect deterrence perceptions in East Asia. More broadly, concerns among U.S. Asian allies that the Iran war could weaken deterrence against China suggest that cross-regional signaling effects are already becoming strategically relevant (Reuters, 2026a, 2026f).

Second, East Asian deterrence should not be framed primarily around invasion scenarios. The most plausible pathways to a serious crisis remain coercive and cumulative rather than instantly decisive. In the Taiwan case, blockade, quarantine, missile demonstrations, cyber disruption, and information operations may be more operationally attractive than immediate amphibious assault. In the South China Sea, localized maritime clashes involving coast guards, maritime militia, and allied patrols may produce strategic effects disproportionate to their immediate scale. On the Korean Peninsula, the policy problem is different again: the issue is not prolonged coercion, but the possibility that a compressed and nuclear-shadowed environment could produce rapid escalation once a crisis begins. A differentiated regional deterrence strategy is therefore more appropriate than a single invasion-centered framework (AMTI, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b; Cancian et al., 2025; DoD, 2024; Kepe & Harold, 2025; Lee, 2026; Reuters, 2026c, 2026e, 2026g, 2026h).

Third, the credibility of major-power strategy in the coming period may depend less on winning a single decisive war than on sustaining effective capacity across multiple regions without allowing cross-regional pressures to accumulate into visible strategic strain. In practical terms, this means preserving not only military readiness, but also alliance coordination, command integration, logistics resilience, and political confidence under simultaneous pressure. This is especially relevant in East Asia, where recent trilateral activity involving the United States, Japan, and the Philippines, together with continuing U.S.–South Korea exercises and tighter alliance coordination, suggests that future crises are likely to test not only force posture but also the cohesion and responsiveness of the broader regional security architecture (Frederick et al., 2023; Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2025; Reuters, 2026c).

In that sense, the current Middle East war is already about more than the Middle East. It is part of a wider sequence in which regional crises progressively reveal the operating limits of major powers and the resilience of their alliance systems. Ukraine exposed the limits of Russian military power under prolonged attritional conditions. The U.S.–Iran war is exposing the limits of advanced military power in translating high-intensity strikes into rapid war termination, while also revealing how such a war can reshape force-allocation decisions and strategic perceptions in other regions. If East Asia is tested next, the central question will be larger still: whether the United States and its allies can sustain deterrence, political cohesion, and operational coherence in the most demanding maritime theater of the twenty-first century (DoD, 2024; Kepe & Harold, 2025; Schatz et al., 2025; Wu, 2026a, 2026b).

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that the U.S.–Iran war should not be treated as a self-contained Middle Eastern crisis. Its broader significance lies in the strategic chain reactions it may generate across other regions by consuming scarce U.S. assets, narrowing alliance decision space, and reshaping how regional actors interpret American availability, resolve, and prioritization (Reuters, 2026a, 2026f).

This does not mean that war in the Middle East mechanically produces war in East Asia. It does mean, however, that such a conflict can reduce U.S. strategic slack and alter opportunity perceptions in the Western Pacific. Under those conditions, East Asia appears to be the most plausible next theater for a capability-revealing confrontation. The most likely pathway is not immediate all-out war, but a prolonged coercive contest centered on Taiwan, potentially involving blockade-like pressure, quarantine measures, cyber disruption, and layered escalation. A limited South China Sea clash with alliance spillover remains a secondary pathway. A Korean Peninsula crisis is less likely, but carries the highest immediate escalation danger because of the theater's compressed geography and nuclear shadow (AMTI, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b; Cancian et al., 2025; Lee, 2026; Reuters, 2026c, 2026e, 2026g, 2026h).

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The resulting policy problem is larger than deterring any single contingency in isolation. It is the problem of preserving strategic coherence across multiple theaters at once. The core issue is no longer only whether great powers can prevail in individual wars, but whether they can sustain force allocation, alliance cohesion, and operational credibility under simultaneous regional stress. In that sense, the current Middle East war matters not only for what it changes locally, but for what it may reveal globally about the limits of U.S. military power and coalition management under multi-theater pressure (DoD, 2024; Kepe & Harold, 2025; Schatz et al., 2025; Wu, 2026a, 2026b).

Methodology Note

This paper is an analytical working paper based on qualitative synthesis of open-source materials rather than original fieldwork, proprietary datasets, or classified sources. Its evidentiary base draws on four principal categories of material: official government assessments and policy documents, including the U.S. Department of Defense's 2024 report on Chinese military power and selected 2026 Chinese official materials released during the Two Sessions; institutionally reviewed policy research from RAND, CSIS, and AMTI; current reporting from Reuters used to track rapidly evolving cross-regional developments; and the author's prior policy briefs on missile-exchange escalation, force-posture strain, and escalation-ladder dynamics in the U.S.–Iran war.

The paper does not attempt econometric prediction or formal causal identification. Nor is it intended as a predictive model. Rather, it offers a structured analytical assessment of plausible strategic pathways based on comparative strategic analysis, scenario-based reasoning, and cross-regional inference. Official documents are used primarily to identify policy signals, strategic priorities, and capability-development directions; think tank research is used to frame operational scenarios and alliance dynamics; and current reporting is used to capture recent changes in force allocation, regional signaling, and security perceptions. Because several relevant developments remain fluid and politically contested, the judgments advanced here should be understood as provisional analytical assessments rather than deterministic forecasts, and they remain subject to revision as new evidence emerges.

While the paper does not focus on AI as an independent variable, its analysis remains relevant to AI-mediated warfare because the battlespaces under discussion are increasingly structured by AI-enabled ISR, data-fused air and missile defense, and accelerated decision cycles in high-tempo strike exchanges.

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