

## Policy Brief

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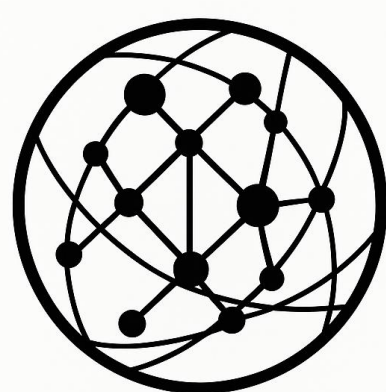
This policy brief is part of the EPINOVA Policy Brief Series on AI-Enabled Warfare, Sustainability, and Global Security Governance.

### Recommended Citation:

Wu, Shaoyuan (2026), *The U.S.–Iran War and East Asia’s Next Strategic Test: Why the Middle East Conflict May Reshape Risk in the Western Pacific*, Policy Brief No. EPINOVA-2026-PB-10, Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18894858>.

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## The U.S.–Iran War and East Asia’s Next Strategic Test: Why the Middle East Conflict May Reshape Risk in the Western Pacific

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**Date:** March 06, 2026

### Executive Summary

The U.S.–Iran war should not be treated as a self-contained Middle Eastern crisis. Its wider significance lies in the strategic chain reactions it may generate across other regions by consuming scarce U.S. assets, compressing alliance decision space, and altering how regional actors interpret American availability, resolve, and prioritization. The central question is no longer only what happens in the Gulf. It is whether the conflict is generating cross-regional strategic strain that reshapes deterrence dynamics in East Asia.

This brief advances four judgments.

First, the Russia–Ukraine War and the U.S.–Iran war should be understood as capability-revealing wars. Ukraine has exposed the limits of Russian military power under prolonged attritional conditions. The Middle East conflict is exposing the constraints of advanced military power in translating high-intensity strike operations into rapid war termination, while also highlighting missile-exchange dynamics, air- and missile-defense burdens, critical-node vulnerability, and alliance-enabled regional campaigning.

Second, East Asia is the most plausible next theater in which a new capability test could emerge. A serious East Asian crisis would not simply replicate the patterns seen in Ukraine or the Middle East. It would combine maritime warfare, aerospace operations, long-range precision strike, alliance access, civilian resilience, and escalation management under nuclear-shadow conditions.

Third, the most likely East Asian pathway is not immediate all-out war. It is a layered coercive confrontation, most plausibly a Taiwan-centered crisis involving blockade-like pressure, quarantine, missile demonstrations, cyber disruption, and information operations. South China Sea friction remains the second most likely pathway, while a Korean Peninsula crisis remains lower in probability but potentially highest in immediate escalation risk.

Fourth, East Asian risk is not best understood through a stand-alone “China–Japan war” frame. Japan’s security role is increasingly embedded in alliance structures, trilateral coordination, and broader cross-regional burden sharing. Any serious confrontation involving Japan and China would more plausibly unfold within a broader U.S.–China competitive framework rather than as an isolated bilateral conflict.

The policy implication is straightforward: East Asian deterrence should not be framed only around invasion scenarios. The more pressing challenge is whether the United States and its allies can preserve strategic coherence, alliance confidence, and operational capacity across multiple regions at once. If East Asia is tested next, the real issue will not simply be who can win a war fastest. It will be whether a global power and its allies can sustain deterrence under simultaneous and cross-regional pressure.

## Policy Brief

### 1. Why This Matters

Recent conflicts suggest that major-power competition is being clarified through a sequence of geographically distinct but strategically connected wars. Ukraine revealed the wartime limits of Russian power. The U.S.–Iran war is now revealing the limits of advanced military power under missile-intensive regional escalation. East Asia may be next.

What makes this moment strategically significant is not only battlefield performance, but the possibility that one war can reshape deterrence in another region. Force-allocation pressures, alliance signaling effects, missile-defense redeployment, and political perceptions of U.S. prioritization can all transmit across regions before any formal change in doctrine or strategy is announced.

### 2. Key Judgments

#### A. The U.S.–Iran war has cross-regional consequences

The conflict matters beyond the Gulf because it can consume scarce assets, reduce strategic slack, and complicate alliance coordination. Even if these effects do not automatically trigger aggression elsewhere, they can alter how regional actors assess opportunity, vulnerability, and U.S. resolve.

#### B. Taiwan remains the most likely serious East Asian contingency

The most plausible pathway is not immediate invasion, but prolonged coercion: blockade, quarantine, cyber disruption, missile signaling, and layered escalation. Such a confrontation would test not only military capability, but also civilian resilience, alliance cohesion, and conflict-phase access.

#### C. The South China Sea is the most likely “limited clash” pathway

A localized incident involving China and the Philippines could remain geographically narrow, but under tighter U.S.–Japan–Philippines coordination it could still produce wider alliance spillover and strategic signaling effects disproportionate to the initial clash.

#### D. The Korean Peninsula remains the fastest escalation theater

A peninsula crisis is less likely than a Taiwan or South China Sea contingency, but once triggered it would likely escalate faster. The issue there is not prolonged coercion, but compressed decision time, nuclear shadow, command coordination, and immediate deterrence credibility.

#### E. “China–Japan war” is not the best primary frame

Japan’s role is increasingly shaped by alliance integration, command coordination, and wider regional or extra-regional burden sharing. East Asian risk is therefore better understood through the broader U.S.–China competitive structure than through an isolated bilateral lens.

**Policy Brief****3. Policy Implications**

First, policymakers should stop treating regional conflicts as compartmentalized. Cross-regional interaction may emerge through missile-defense redeployment, maritime commitments, supply-chain disruption, and alliance psychology long before it appears in formal strategy documents.

Second, East Asian deterrence should not focus narrowly on invasion scenarios. The more likely near-term challenge is coercive pressure below the threshold of immediate general war.

Third, U.S. strategic credibility will depend less on prevailing in one decisive campaign than on sustaining operational effectiveness, alliance cohesion, and political confidence across multiple regions at once.

**4. What to Watch**

The most important indicators over the next 6–18 months are:

- Signs of further U.S. force reallocation from Asia to the Middle East;
- Expanded Chinese coercive activity around Taiwan short of invasion;
- Increased maritime militia and coast guard pressure in the South China Sea;
- Greater trilateral or mini-lateral alliance coordination involving the United States, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea; and
- North Korean missile or nuclear signaling under conditions of compressed regional deterrence.

**5. Bottom Line**

The U.S.–Iran war may prove strategically important not only because of what it changes in the Middle East, but because of what others infer from it elsewhere. If East Asia becomes the next capability-revealing theater, the central question will not simply be whether war begins. It will be whether prolonged coercion, alliance stress, and cross-regional force pressures reveal new limits in the ability of the United States and its partners to sustain deterrence across multiple fronts.