

Policy Brief

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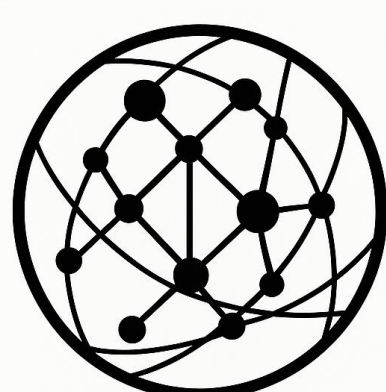
This policy brief is part of the EPINOVA Policy Brief Series on Strategic Competition, AI-Enabled Warfare, and Information Conflict.

Recommended Citation:

Wu, Shaoyuan (2026), Seizing Kharg Island: U.S. Operational Superiority and the Risk of Crossing the Loss-of-Control Threshold, Policy Brief No. EPINOVA-2026-PB-15, Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19138942>.

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Seizing Kharg Island:

U.S. Operational Superiority and the Risk of Crossing the Loss-of-Control Threshold

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Date: March 20, 2026

Key Judgments

The United States retains decisive advantages in long-range joint strike, maritime-air power projection, and multi-domain force integration. Iran, however, continues to possess sufficient missile, drone, mining, and littoral denial capabilities to render U.S. military access feasible but costly, and sustained control increasingly expensive, uncertain, and politically constrained.

The central issue is therefore not whether the United States can achieve battlefield superiority. It is whether Washington can convert operational dominance into a durable political outcome without becoming trapped in a high-cost cycle of forward presence, defensive expenditure, and escalation management.

Under current conditions, the most likely trajectory is not decisive military collapse by either side, but a widening pattern of simultaneous systemic burden accumulation: rising U.S. expeditionary and defensive costs, expanding Iranian infrastructure and fiscal losses, increasing exposure of surrounding states, and intensifying global shock across energy, shipping, insurance, inflation, and supply chains.

In this context, the decisive question is no longer who wins first in operational terms, but which actor approaches the loss-of-control threshold (LoCT) first under cumulative systemic pressure.

Executive Summary

Based on currently available battlefield information, known deployments, observed strike patterns, and existing force structures, the United States continues to hold clear operational advantages over Iran in long-range precision strike, sea-air integration, and expeditionary command-and-support architecture. It retains the capacity to sustain deep strikes, secure maritime corridors, and execute limited amphibious or node-seizure operations.

Iran, by contrast, is not positioned to defeat the United States symmetrically in either the air or maritime domain. Yet it retains sufficient missile, drone, mining, and coastal denial capabilities to systematically increase the cost of U.S. access, persistence, and political management. Strategically, Iran does not need to win a conventional campaign outright. It needs only to sustain **continuous, distributed, and politically amplifiable pressure.**

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The conflict is therefore best understood not as a contest for decisive battlefield victory, but as a struggle over the **sustainability of control under mounting systemic stress**. The United States can likely dominate major operational engagements. What remains uncertain is whether it can do so without drifting into an increasingly expensive and strategically self-defeating posture of prolonged forward exposure.

Iran, meanwhile, faces significant infrastructure degradation and economic vulnerability, but retains the capacity to impose continuing systemic costs on the United States, its regional partners, and the global economy.

If current conflict intensity persists, the estimated total systemic burden may reach **\$160 billion–\$470 billion within 30 days**, and **\$470 billion–\$1.28 trillion within 90 days**. These figures represent not audited war costs, but **systemic burden estimates**, capturing the interaction of military expenditure, infrastructure damage, regional spillover, and global economic shock

1. The Strategic Problem

The current U.S.–Iran confrontation has moved beyond conventional military competition. It is increasingly a form of systemic pressure competition unfolding across military, energy, shipping, fiscal, informational, and political domains.

In this environment, the analytically relevant question is no longer which side possesses greater military strength. Rather, it is which actor can sustain control longest under accumulating and interacting forms of systemic stress.

The United States' principal advantage lies in its ability to integrate long-range, high-intensity, multi-domain power into coherent campaigns supported by global logistics, allied basing, intelligence networks, and industrial replenishment. Iran's advantage lies in leveraging geography, low-cost denial tools, distributed attack nodes, and escalation dynamics to generate persistent friction for a materially superior adversary.

Accordingly, this conflict is not best understood as a balance-of-power problem. It is a question of which form of power is structurally better adapted to the present geographic, temporal, and political environment.

2. U.S. Military Position: Strong Access, Expensive Persistence

The United States benefits from four core operational strengths:

First, **deep precision-strike capability**. The sustained tempo of U.S. and Israeli operations demonstrates the continued effectiveness of ISR, aerial refueling, electronic warfare, and long-range strike coordination.

Second, **sea-to-shore projection capability**. Amphibious Ready Groups and Marine Expeditionary Units provide flexible options for limited assault, rapid response, temporary node control, and contingency operations.

Third, **maritime–air persistence and rotation capacity**. Carrier groups, amphibious platforms, surface combatants, tankers, and airborne assets can be integrated into a continuous operational presence rather than episodic deployments.

Fourth, **multi-domain resilience**. Even when individual nodes are degraded, the broader system can continue functioning through redundancy and cross-domain substitution.

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Yet the core constraint is not access—it is **persistence under cost**.

As U.S. forces move closer to the Strait of Hormuz, Kharg Island, and the Iranian littoral, they face escalating burdens from missile defense, drone defense, mine countermeasures, base hardening, escort operations, and continuous exposure to low-cost harassment.

The United States can therefore create short-term operational facts, but may struggle to convert them into long-term political realities at acceptable cost.

3. Iran's Military Position: Limited Symmetry, Effective Cost Imposition

Iran cannot match the United States in symmetric warfare. But strategic effectiveness does not require symmetry.

Its strength lies in sustained cost imposition. Missile inventories, drone production, mobile launch systems, underground storage, mines, and littoral harassment tools allow Iran to continue generating operational and political pressure even under sustained attack.

In the strike domain, Iran does not need to contest air superiority. It only needs to preserve enough distributed launch capability to force the United States into **a dual-cost structure of offense and defense**.

In the maritime domain, Iran's advantage lies in littoral denial, not sea control. Mines, anti-ship missiles, drones, and fast-boat tactics need not defeat U.S. naval forces outright. They need only make sustained presence costly, uncertain, and politically difficult.

This aligns with a **cost-imposition strategy**: not seizing control, but continuously raising the cost of maintaining it.

4. Domain-by-Domain Assessment

- a) **Air Domain:** U.S. dominance is clear, but does not eliminate distributed threats.
- b) **Maritime Domain:** Access is feasible; persistence is costly.
- c) **Amphibious Domain:** Seizure is possible; long-term stabilization is not cost-efficient.
- d) **Missile Defense:** Structural cost asymmetry favors the attacker.
- e) **Information Domain:** Military actions rapidly translate into political constraints.

5. Strategic Options

- a) **Most Likely Approach:** Long-range suppression + maritime escort + amphibious signaling + limited node-control preparation.
- b) **Conditional Option:** Short-duration seizure or denial of selected coastal nodes with clearly defined exit strategies.
- c) **Least Sustainable Option:** Prolonged control of Kharg Island or similar near-shore objectives under persistent missile and drone threat.

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6. Scenario-Based Cost and Loss Estimate

Cost escalation is driven not linearly by combat intensity, but by the interaction between defensive expenditure, persistence duration, and systemic spillover effects.

A. 30-Day Window

- United States direct military and fiscal cost: \$30B–\$80B.
- Iran direct military and economic losses: \$45B–\$120B.
- Surrounding states' direct losses: \$25B–\$90B.
- Global shock: \$60B–\$180B.

B. 90-Day Window

- United States direct military and fiscal cost: \$90B–\$220B.
- Iran direct military and economic losses: \$110B–\$280B.
- Surrounding states' direct losses: \$70B–\$180B.
- Global shock: \$200B–\$600B.

C. Aggregate Systemic Burden

- 30-day total: \$160B–\$470B.
- 90-day total: \$470B–\$1.28T.

7. Distribution of Burden

The burden of conflict is distributed unevenly. **The United States loses through expense, Iran through destruction, surrounding states through entanglement, and the global economy through systemic price shock.**

- a) **The United States pays primarily through cost.** Its principal losses come from sustained expeditionary operations, missile and drone defense, escort and mine-clearing missions, force rotation, replenishment, and the maintenance of a costly forward operating posture.
- b) **Iran pays primarily through destruction.** Its main burdens fall on military infrastructure, energy exports, fixed facilities, fiscal revenue, and domestic economic resilience.
- c) **Surrounding states pay primarily through involuntary exposure.** They are drawn into the conflict through damaged energy infrastructure, disrupted aviation and maritime traffic, higher insurance and financing costs, and broader investor uncertainty.
- d) **The global system pays primarily through price shock.** Energy volatility, shipping risk, insurance escalation, inflation, trade rerouting, and supply-chain distortion are likely to constitute the largest aggregate external burden.

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8. Policy Implications

This conflict yields four main policy implications.

- a) **Military superiority does not equal cheap control.** The United States can dominate key operational engagements, but not necessarily convert that dominance into sustainable long-term control near the Iranian littoral at acceptable cost.
- b) **Iran's strategic effectiveness lies not in symmetric victory, but in sustained cost imposition.** As long as it retains enough missiles, drones, mines, and political signaling capacity, it can continue forcing the United States and its partners to pay.
- c) **The greatest danger lies not in a single tactical escalation, but in cumulative persistence costs.** The longer high-intensity operations continue, the more likely the conflict becomes to generate widening spillover, declining control, and rising systemic stress.
- d) **The ultimate determinant of outcome is not who wins the next battle, but who approaches the loss-of-control threshold first.** The United States appears more vulnerable to fiscal-strategic overextension; Iran appears more vulnerable to a legitimacy-retaliation spiral; surrounding states and global markets are increasingly exposed to indirect but compounding pressures.

Conclusion

The United States retains the ability to achieve operational superiority and execute a range of military options, including sustained strike and limited amphibious action. Iran, while unable to prevail conventionally, retains sufficient capability to impose continuous costs and expand systemic pressure.

The core question is not whether the United States can win battles, but whether it can convert battlefield advantage into a sustainable political outcome without becoming trapped in a high-cost, high-spillover, and increasingly uncontrollable structure of forward persistence.

In essence, **the United States can win operationally, but not necessarily govern the outcome cheaply. Iran cannot win conventionally, but can still shape the cost structure of the war.**