

## Policy Brief

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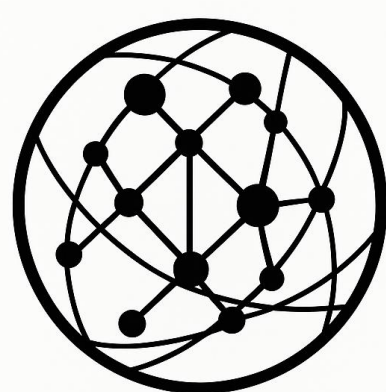
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## Deterrence Under Cost Pressure: From Overmatch to Cost Imposition in the U.S.–Iran Conflict

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### Key Judgments

- The United States is facing a degradation in strategic signaling coherence, reducing the interpretability and credibility of its deterrence posture.
- The conflict reflects a structural shift from overmatch-based deterrence to cost-imposition dynamics, eroding the feasibility of low-cost dominance.
- Identity-based mobilization functions as a situational political instrument, rather than a durable basis for alignment.
- The international system is evolving from alliance-centric blocs to partially aligned networks, increasing systemic complexity and escalation uncertainty.

### 1. Strategic Communication Gaps and Deterrence Stability

The current U.S.–Iran confrontation reflects more than a regional military escalation. It signals a broader adjustment in deterrence mechanisms, operational logic, and international structure.

At the operational level, U.S. military actions remain highly structured and consistent with established planning capacity. However, this coherence is not matched at the level of political signaling. Public messaging across senior leadership has been inconsistent, with ambiguity over whether U.S. objectives prioritize deterrence, escalation control, or broader coercive degradation.

This action–narrative gap reduces the external legibility of U.S. strategy. Deterrence depends not only on capability, but on the clarity and credibility of intent. When signaling becomes ambiguous, adversaries face uncertainty not about U.S. strength, but about thresholds, limits, and escalation pathways.

The result is not deterrence failure, but deterrence instability—a condition in which declining interpretability increases the risk of miscalculation.

### 2. From Overmatch to Cost Imposition

The conflict highlights a structural transition in the logic of coercion. U.S. deterrence has traditionally relied on overmatch dominance—superiority sufficient to make coercion both credible and relatively low-cost. This condition is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

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Iran’s operational approach, characterized by sustained missile and drone strikes, distributed launch platforms, and saturation tactics, exploits the asymmetry between low-cost offense and high-cost defense. Relatively inexpensive strike systems can compel repeated use of significantly more costly interceptors and defensive assets.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the cost ratio of defense to offense remains consistently above parity, with episodic spikes under higher-intensity or saturation attack conditions. This indicates that cost asymmetry is not incidental, but structurally embedded in the interaction dynamic.

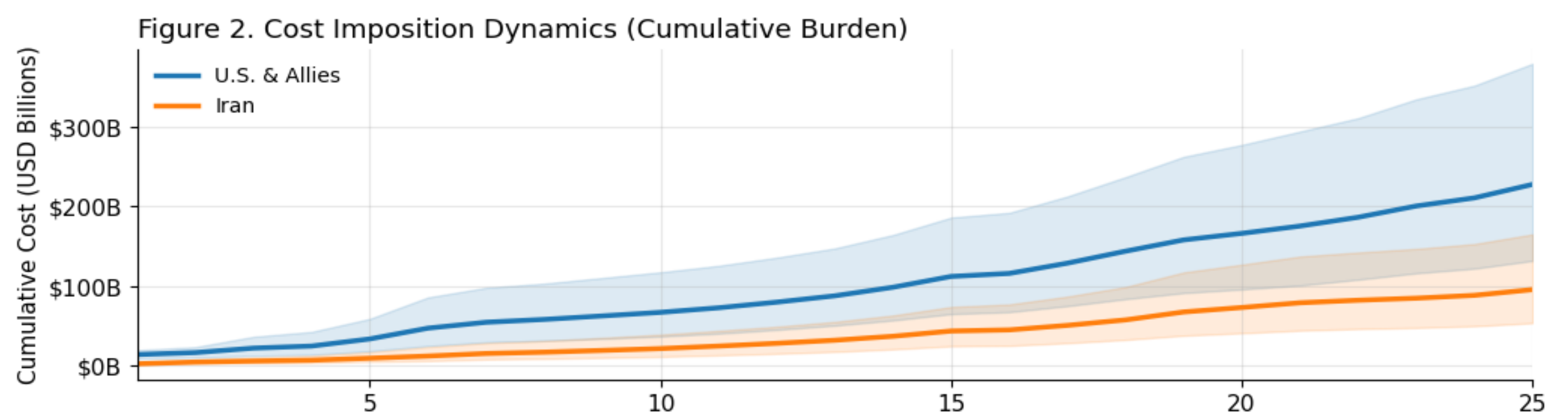
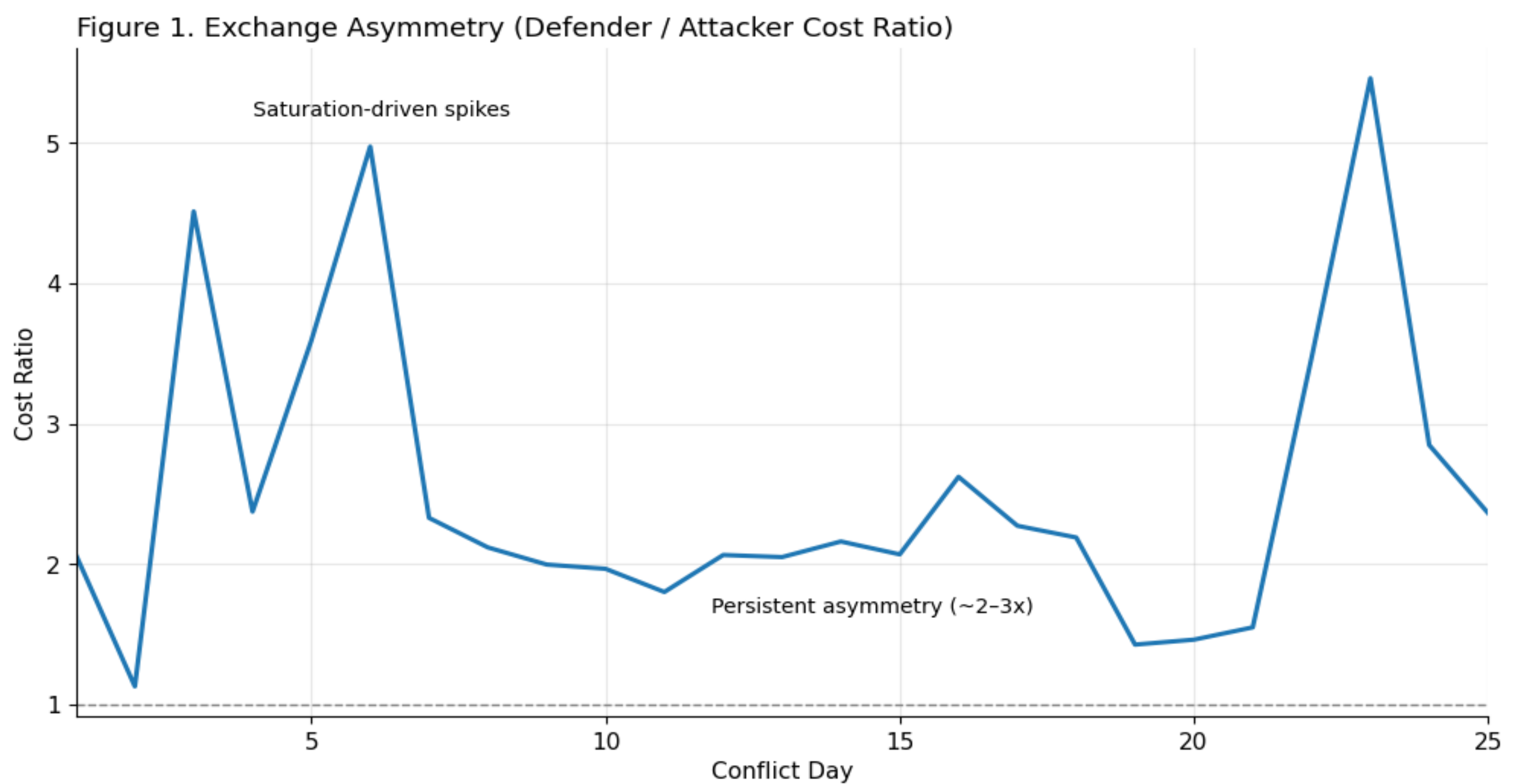
While individual attacks may have limited tactical effect, repeated cycles generate cumulative pressure. Three dynamics follow:

- The defender is subjected to continuous resource expenditure;
- Breakthrough outcomes become probabilistic rather than exceptional;
- Deterrence shifts from reputational dominance to resource sustainability.

Under these conditions, the United States is no longer operating within a framework of unilateral suppression, but within a system of reciprocal cost exchange.

Deterrence persists, but in a transformed form—not as inevitability, but as constraint under sustained cost pressure.

As shown in **Figure 2**, cumulative cost trajectories diverge steadily over time. While aggregate expenditure remains higher on the U.S. side, the more significant pattern is the persistence of upward cost pressure under repeated engagement cycles.



Source: MCCM (EPINOVA). Mid estimates shown; shaded bands indicate low-high ranges. CAPEX continuity included for U.S. series. Global Shock excluded.

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### 3. Identity as an Instrumental Mobilization Framework

As material asymmetries persist, identity-based narratives become increasingly important as mechanisms for sustaining political cohesion and framing conflict. Reactions often attributed to the “Islamic world” are better understood as instrumental mobilization frameworks activated under specific conditions, rather than evidence of structural consolidation.

Such narratives serve to:

- Temporarily compress internal divisions;
- Provide a shared framework for external opposition;
- Reinforce legitimacy under conflict conditions.

However, underlying geopolitical, sectarian, and national divergences remain intact. Identity alignment in this context is conditional, situational, and reversible, rather than a foundation for durable strategic cohesion.

### 4. From Alliances to Partially Aligned Networks

The international structure surrounding the conflict is increasingly defined by partially aligned networks rather than formal alliance cohesion.

Relationships involving China, Pakistan, and Iran illustrate how overlapping interests and selective coordination can coexist without unified strategic commitment. These interactions are characterized by cooperation in some domains alongside persistent divergence in others.

This emerging configuration differs from traditional alliance systems in three key ways:

- Alignment is modular rather than comprehensive;
- Coordination is situational rather than institutionalized;
- Commitment is deliberately limited.

As a result, conflict dynamics become less predictable. External actors cannot rely on bloc-based assumptions, and escalation pathways become more diffuse and nonlinear.

### Conclusion

The U.S.–Iran conflict does not represent a reversal of the global balance of power. U.S. advantages in military, technological, and economic domains remain substantial.

However, the mechanisms through which power is translated into strategic outcomes are changing.

Three shifts are particularly significant:

- From clear signaling to contested interpretability;
- From low-cost dominance to sustained cost exchange;
- From fixed alliances to flexible network structures.

In this environment, strategic advantage depends less on the ability to impose outcomes unilaterally, and more on the capacity to sustain position within prolonged, distributed competition.

The central strategic challenge is no longer dominance alone, but the ability to endure, adapt, and signal coherently under sustained system-wide cost pressure.

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### Policy Implications

- **Reinforce signaling discipline as a core component of deterrence.** Strategic communication should be treated as an operational variable, not a secondary function.
- **Prioritize defensive sustainability over point-defense success.** Cost-imposition dynamics require planning for prolonged expenditure, not only interception effectiveness.
- **Adapt strategic planning to networked environments.** Scenario development should move beyond bloc-based assumptions toward modeling partially aligned, multi-actor systems.