

Policy Brief

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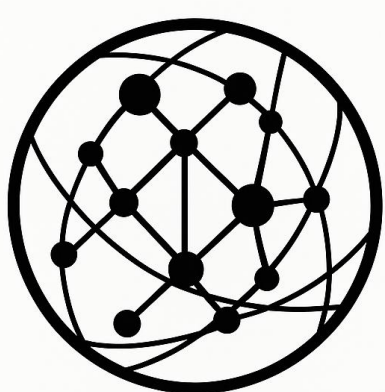
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Divergent War Aims:

The U.S., Israel, and the Strategic Logic of Divergence in the Iran Conflict

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Key Judgments

- The United States and Israel are operationally aligned but strategically divergent.
- U.S. strategy prioritizes escalation control and control sustainability, while Israel prioritizes deterrence restoration through coercive credibility.
- This divergence reflects structural constraints and threat environments, rather than temporary policy disagreement.
- Iran is pursuing a cost-imposition strategy designed to exploit coalition asymmetry and amplify divergence over time.
- The most likely near-term trajectory is continued operational cooperation alongside widening differences in tempo, thresholds, and risk tolerance.

Executive Summary

The United States and Israel are often treated as strategically aligned in confronting Iran, but in practice their war aims diverge in structure, time horizon, and acceptable levels of escalation. This divergence does not immediately disrupt operational coordination, but it generates growing tension in how success, cost, and escalation thresholds are defined.

The United States prioritizes control sustainability—the ability to apply sustained pressure while maintaining escalation control, preserving coalition cohesion, and avoiding strategic overextension. Israel, by contrast, prioritizes deterrence restoration through coercive credibility, even at the risk of escalation.

Iran's strategy is best understood as cost imposition under asymmetry. Rather than seeking decisive battlefield victory, Tehran aims to exploit divergence within the opposing coalition. Through sustained, low-cost pressure, it can amplify differences in tempo, cost tolerance, and strategic objectives.

The result is not alliance breakdown, but a shift toward strategic asymmetry within the coalition, in which continued coordination masks increasingly divergent strategic logics.

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1. The Illusion of Full Alignment

Prevailing analysis assumes that the United States and Israel are pursuing a single, unified strategy. This assumption holds at the operational level: both countries are targeting Iranian capabilities, coordinating defense, and working to limit immediate threats. Operational alignment, however, masks rather than resolves strategic divergence.

The United States is managing a global security system, while Israel is responding to an immediate and localized threat environment. These positions generate different priorities, timelines, and definitions of success.

The alliance is operationally coherent but strategically non-identical. This divergence is structurally consequential rather than incidental. It shapes how each actor defines acceptable cost, tolerable escalation, and sufficient outcomes. The risk is not immediate rupture, but a gradual divergence in thresholds of time, cost, and strategic end states that may increasingly constrain coordinated strategy over time.

2. The U.S. Approach: Control Sustainability Under Constraint

For the United States, the conflict with Iran is not an isolated confrontation, but one of several simultaneous strategic challenges. U.S. decisionmakers must balance commitments in the Middle East with ongoing obligations in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, as well as domestic political constraints and long-term fiscal pressures.

Under these conditions, U.S. strategy is shaped by three core priorities:

- **Prevent regional escalation into a broader war;**
- **Protect critical systems, including energy flows, maritime routes, and alliance networks;**
- **Limit long-term costs, both military and political.**

Taken together, these priorities reflect a broader strategic logic of control sustainability. Here, control sustainability refers to the ability to apply sustained pressure on an adversary while maintaining control over escalation, preserving alliance cohesion, and avoiding strategic overextension across multiple theaters.

Accordingly, the United States is not seeking maximal escalation, even when it possesses the capability to do so. Instead, it aims to apply pressure while retaining control over the scope, tempo, and duration of the conflict.

From Washington's perspective, the primary risk is not a single battlefield setback, but a gradual expansion of the conflict that becomes increasingly costly, politically constraining, and strategically difficult to manage over time. **For Washington, the primary risk is not defeat, but loss of control.**

3. The Israeli Approach: Coercive Credibility and Deterrence Restoration

Israel operates in a fundamentally different strategic environment. The threat posed by Iran and its regional partners is immediate, persistent, and geographically proximate. As a result, Israel's objective is not simply to manage the conflict, but to alter the underlying security equation through credible coercion.

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This approach is shaped by three core priorities:

- **Degrade Iranian capabilities and affiliated networks;**
- **Demonstrate credible and visible consequences for attacks on Israel;**
- **Reestablish deterrence in a manner that is both observable and durable.**

Taken together, these priorities reflect a strategic logic centered on **coercive credibility**—the need to ensure that adversaries perceive retaliation as both inevitable and consequential.

Deterrence, in this context, is not an abstract condition, but a function of visible and credible punishment.

From Israel’s perspective, an outcome that leaves Iranian capabilities largely intact, or fails to impose meaningful and observable costs, risks reinforcing adversary expectations that aggression can be sustained without consequence.

This logic produces a higher tolerance for escalation and a stronger preference for sustained pressure. Escalation is therefore not merely a risk to be managed, but in some cases a necessary instrument for restoring deterrence credibility. **For Israel, the central requirement is not control, but credible effect.**

4. Where the Gap Emerges: Diverging Thresholds of War

The divergence between the United States and Israel is most clearly observed not at the level of stated objectives, but at the level of thresholds—the points at which costs, escalation, and outcomes are judged acceptable.

Table 1 structures this divergence across four core dimensions: time horizon, strategic objective, escalation preference, and primary constraint.

The United States operates with a longer-term, system-oriented perspective and therefore prioritizes managing escalation within sustainable bounds. Israel, by contrast, faces immediate security pressures and demonstrates a higher tolerance for escalation in pursuit of deterrence restoration.

Crucially, this divergence is not reducible to differences in aggressiveness. Rather, it reflects fundamentally different answers to four underlying questions:

- What is the purpose of the war?
- What outcome is sufficient?
- What level of cost is sustainable?
- What degree of escalation is acceptable?

The gap, therefore, is not about whether to act, but about where to stop.

This distinction produces structural tension in how the conflict is conducted over time. Even under conditions of close coordination, differences in thresholds shape operational tempo, resource allocation, and escalation pathways.

As the conflict persists, these threshold divergences become increasingly consequential, constraining the sustainability of coordinated strategy and creating space for adversaries to exploit asymmetry within the alliance.

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Table 1. Diverging Threshold Logics of War: United States vs. Israel

Dimension	United States	Israel
Time Horizon	Long-term and system-oriented	Short-term and threat-driven
Strategic Objective	Contain risks and preserve regional stability	Alter the security environment and restore deterrence
Escalation Preference	Limit and manage escalation	Accept and in some cases drive escalation
Primary Constraint	Global commitments and systemic exposure	Immediate and localized security threats

5. Iran’s Strategy: Cost Imposition and Coalition Stress

Iran’s strategic approach is best understood not as a search for decisive battlefield victory, but as a sustained effort to impose cumulative costs and exploit asymmetries within the opposing coalition. This interpretation is consistent with earlier EPINOVA policy briefs on missile exchanges, cost-imposition logic, and the shift from overmatch to reciprocal cost pressure.

Three mechanisms are central to this strategy.

- a) **Iran exploits offense–defense cost asymmetry.** Relatively low-cost missiles and drones can compel repeated expenditure of far more expensive defensive systems. Even where immediate damage remains limited, the financial and operational burden imposed on the defender accumulates over time.
- b) **Iran pursues a wedge strategy.** By sustaining calibrated pressure that keeps Israel under immediate threat while avoiding actions that clearly trigger full-scale U.S. entry, Tehran forces Washington and Jerusalem to operate under different temporal logics—one oriented toward long-term control, the other toward immediate deterrence restoration.
- c) **Iran benefits from perception effects.** In a high-visibility conflict, selective disclosure, symbolic retaliation, and visible persistence can produce political and alliance pressure disproportionate to purely kinetic outcomes. Coalition cohesion is shaped not only by material losses, but also by perceptions of momentum, resolve, and strategic coherence.

These mechanisms interact cumulatively, producing a self-reinforcing dynamic:

Cost imposition → tempo divergence → coalition-management stress → alliance asymmetry.

Iran does not need to defeat the United States or Israel outright to gain advantage. It needs only to make coalition warfare progressively more expensive, politically more difficult, and strategically less coherent over time.

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Figure 1 illustrates this interaction as a triangular structure, capturing the distinct but interdependent strategic logics of the United States, Israel, and Iran.

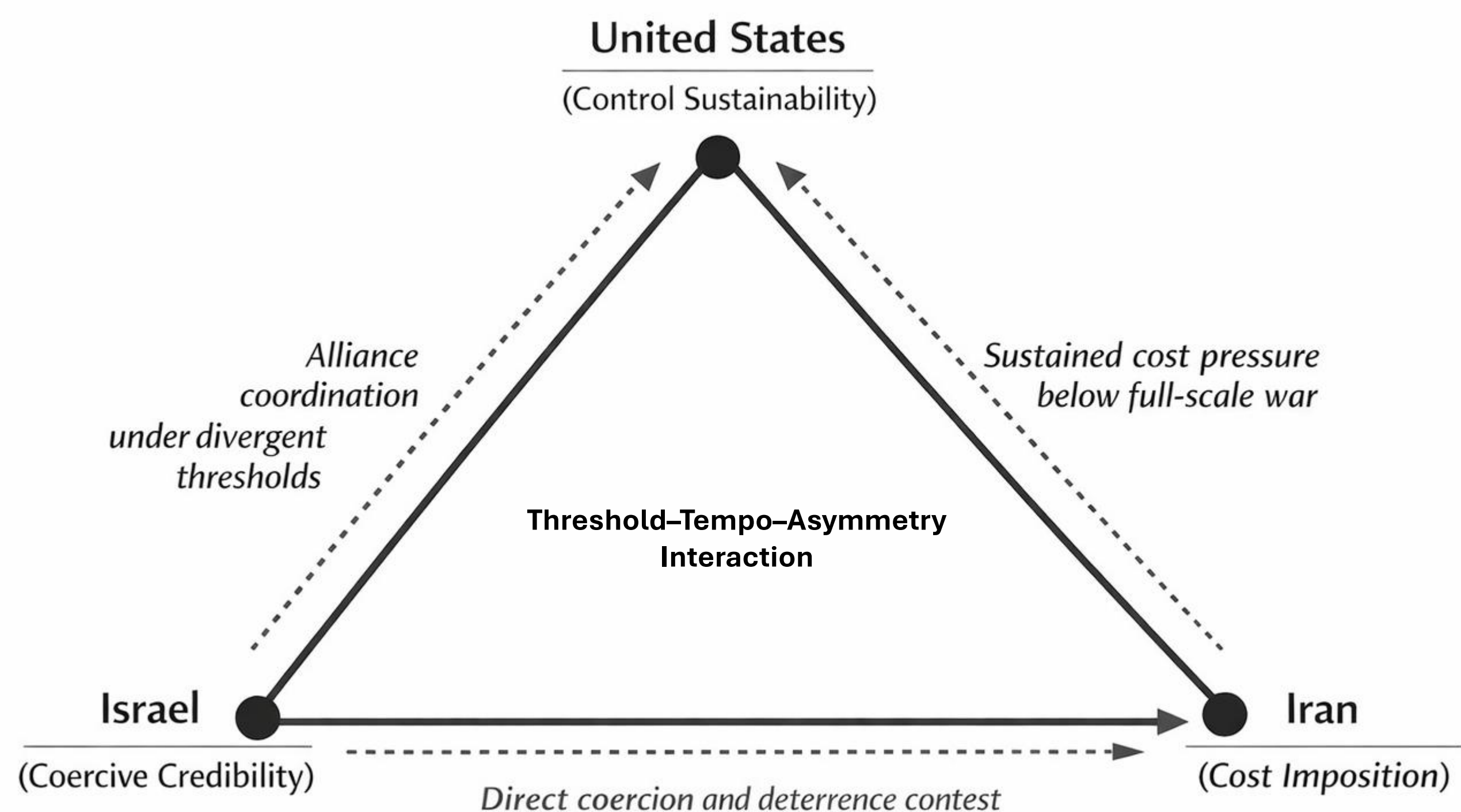


Figure 1. U.S.–Israel–Iran Strategic Interaction Triangle

Note: This figure conceptualizes the conflict as a triangular interaction rather than a linear confrontation. The United States prioritizes escalation control and regional containment; Israel emphasizes sustained pressure to restore deterrence; and Iran pursues cost imposition while exploiting differences in coalition risk tolerance. The triangle highlights three distinct interaction patterns: alliance coordination under divergent thresholds (U.S.–Israel), direct coercion and counter-coercion (Israel–Iran), and sustained pressure below the threshold of full-scale war (Iran–U.S.).

6. Likely Near-Term Path

Three broad near-term pathways are most plausible, each shaped by how divergence in thresholds and strategic priorities evolves over time.

- a) **Managed Asymmetry (Most Likely):** The United States continues to provide enabling support—defensive assistance, intelligence, and logistical backing—while Israel sustains a more forward-leaning strike posture. Operational coordination remains intact, but strategic synchronization weakens as differences in acceptable cost, tempo, and escalation thresholds persist.
- b) **Tempo Divergence:** A second pathway is characterized by widening divergence in the pace and scope of operations. Washington seeks to limit escalation or narrow operational objectives, while Israel pushes for broader or more sustained action. The alliance remains intact, but differences in tempo increasingly translate into visible tension over thresholds, timing, and acceptable risk.
- c) **Conditional Decoupling:** A higher-risk pathway emerges if the conflict approaches a level Washington judges strategically unsustainable. In this scenario, the United States narrows the scope of support, declines participation in further escalation, or imposes clearer limits on coalition action. This would not constitute alliance rupture, but would mark a shift from strategic alignment toward selective and conditional support.

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7. Policy Implications

A. For U.S. Policymakers

U.S. policymakers should recognize that alliance unity does not eliminate strategic divergence. Effective coalition management requires explicit alignment not only on operational coordination, but also on end states, escalation thresholds, and definitions of success.

Escalation control must be understood as a coalition-management problem as much as a military one. As differences in tolerance for time, cost, and ambiguity widen between Washington and Jerusalem, the sustainability of a coherent strategy will become increasingly difficult to maintain.

U.S. decisionmakers should define more clearly which outcomes are considered sufficient for deterrence, sustainable for regional stability, and compatible with broader strategic commitments in other theaters.

B. For Alliance Management and Coalition Planning

Policy planning should explicitly incorporate Iran's incentive to widen alliance asymmetry, rather than assuming that increased military pressure will automatically strengthen coalition cohesion.

Coalition strategy should therefore focus not only on joint operations, but also on threshold alignment, including shared understandings of acceptable escalation, tolerable costs, and conditions for termination.

Without such alignment, even successful tactical coordination may mask deeper strategic divergence, creating vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit over time.

C. For Israel

Israeli policymakers should recognize that excessive reliance on escalation risks widening strategic divergence with the United States, potentially constraining long-term coalition effectiveness.

Conclusion

The most consequential development in this conflict is not escalation alone, but divergence in the strategic logic of the anti-Iran alignment.

The United States is fighting to preserve control under rising systemic pressure. Israel is fighting to restore deterrence through visible coercive effect. Iran is fighting to exploit the gap between these two logics.

This does not signal the breakdown of the U.S.–Israel partnership. It signals a shift toward **strategic asymmetry within the alliance**.

As the conflict persists, the central challenge will not be whether the allies can continue to cooperate militarily, but whether they can continue to define the war in compatible terms.

The emerging divide is not tactical—it is definitional.

It reflects fundamentally different understandings of what this war is, what it requires, and what it means to lose.