

From Iran's Strategic Patience to Active Deterrence: Doctrinal Transformation and the Reordering of West Asian Security

Syed Qandil Abbas* and Syeda Hudaisa Kazmi**

Abstract

The 2026 Iran war has immensely impacted the West Asian security order. Differences between the United States (U.S.) and Israel with Iran are more than four decades old, but these differences have never led to a limited or full-scale war. Despite huge pressure from the U.S. and Israel, Iran adopted the doctrine of strategic patience, while the U.S. also preferred immense economic sanctions on Iran instead of direct military confrontation. This paper is an attempt to analyse how and why Iran shifted its policy from strategic patience to active deterrence, as well as how this doctrinal transformation of Iran played a significant role in the reordering of the West Asian security. To address these questions, the theoretical combination and integration of offensive realism and deterrence is employed, which maintains that Iran's shift from strategic patience to active deterrence is not a tactical adjustment but rather represents a structural transformation.

Keywords: 2026 Iran War, the United States, Israel, Iran, Strategic Patience, Deterrence, Persian Gulf, West-Asian Security Order.

* The author is an Associate Professor, School of Politics and IR, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Email: syed572@hotmail.com

** The author is a PhD scholar at the School of Politics and IR (SPIR), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Email: shk280523@gmail.com

Introduction

The strategic logic that governed West Asia for decades has been eroded with the eruption of large-scale aggression on Iran that began on February 28, 2026 by the United States (U.S.) and Israel.¹ This war was not only another iteration of the conflict but a vital transformation in Iran's military doctrine. The region has long faced cycles of containment and limited escalation characterised by Iran's doctrine of "strategic patience," which was a calibrated approach of restraint, proxy warfare, and attritional strategy.² This recent war has, however, brought a decisive departure from this strategic stance towards "active deterrence," which has manifested into overt retaliation, rapid escalation, and direct state-to-state confrontation.

This transformation is the culmination of a series of strategic shocks that eroded the reliance on restraint to limit the confrontation. Following the conflict that began between Hamas and Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent regional escalations, Iran tried to maintain its traditional posture of strategic patience by relying mostly on its regional non-state allies and even giving a limited response in case of aggression from Israel as evident from the Operation True Promise I, II, III (April 2024, October 2024, June 2025 respectively).³ Iran's traditional posture was rooted in the broader doctrine of "Forward Defence" through which Iran asserted its influence through indirect means via partners such as Hezbollah and Hamas, thereby warding off the risk of getting into confrontation with superior military powers such as Israel and the U.S..⁴ Iran's logic behind its adherence to strategic patience was clear: imposing costs on adversaries

¹ Emile Hokayem, "The War Against Iran," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), April 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2026/04/the-war-against-iran/>

² Graham E. Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

³ Shaan Shaikh, "The Iran-Israel Air Conflict, One Week In," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 19, 2024., https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-israel-air-conflict-one-week?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Also See: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, "IRGC Launches 'True Promise 3' Operation against Israeli Military Targets," Tehran Times, June 13, 2025; Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983).

⁴ "Iran's 'Forward Defense,' Israel's Security Dilemma, and American Strategy," *Orbis* 68, no. 3 (2024): 438–461.

by dispersing the conflict across multiple fronts and avoiding the risks of full-scale war.⁵ This supposition began to erode in June 2025, with the U.S.-Israel military action against Iran, during which Iranian assets and leadership were targeted.⁶ Sustained military and diplomatic pressure and failed negotiations led Iranian decision-makers and strategists to realise that “restraint” was no longer a viable option.

On February 28, 2026, the U.S.-Israel offensive on Iran proved to be a decisive turning point. From the Iranian perspective, one important lesson learnt was that patience would not guarantee survival as it did not prevent war, and a more assertive response was necessary to restore deterrence. Therefore, in response to the attack, Iran went for massive and immediate use of force, not only towards the U.S.-Israel but also their allies in the Persian Gulf region as well.⁷

The war determined the nature of this new doctrine of “active deterrence.”⁸ Rather than limiting the response to symbolic or proportional retaliation, Iran adhered to a rapid and large-scale escalation to impose considerable cost right from the beginning of the conflict. Iran showed throughout the 40-day war that with resilience and escalation, it can establish deterrence against adversaries. It was a deliberative attempt to “eschew calibrated retaliation for unbridled escalation” for establishing deterrence under conditions of increasing vulnerability.⁹ The culmination of this strategy was the expansion of the conflict geographically and

⁵ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁶ Alexander Cornwell and Parisa Hafezi, “Israel-Iran Battle Escalates, Civilians Urged to Evacuate Target Areas,” *Reuters*, June 15, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-iran-strike-each-other-new-wave-attacks-2025-06-14/>

⁷ Jonathan Whittall, “The End of Iran’s Strategic Patience,” *Al Jazeera*, March 6, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2026/3/6/the-end-of-irans-strategic-patience>

⁸ Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, “The Strait of Hormuz and Iran’s Active Deterrence Strategy,” in *Circumventing the Middle East Chokepoints: Infrastructure, Strategy and Geopolitics* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2025), 143–162.

⁹ Mona Yacoubian, “Iran’s War Strategy: Don’t Calibrate—Escalate,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 16, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-war-strategy-dont-calibrate-escalate>

functionally encompassing, not only military targets but also energy and economic infrastructure.

One of the most striking features of the conflict was its extension into the economic domain. The war with Iran that started purely as a military operation rapidly turned into a broader campaign, making energy infrastructure, civilian infrastructure, global trade networks, and international travel vulnerable. Both sides engaged in attacks that disrupted oil production and transit in the region. Iran's strategic use of the Strait of Hormuz showed that active deterrence is not only established through military means but also through economic coercion.¹⁰ Iran has shaped adversaries' cost-benefit analysis and compelled their restraint through escalation rather than endurance or patience. Yet, it remains the case that active deterrence carries profound risks of miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation. The 2026 Iran war has exhibited "escalation spirals," which deterrence theorists argue to be a condition under which each side tries to establish credibility, resulting in further retaliation from the other side.¹¹

Therefore, this paper delves deeper into Iran's transition from strategic patience to active deterrence and its systemic implications on the West Asian security. It argues that this shift is not merely a tactical adjustment to immediate threats, but a reorientation in the broader strategic thinking of Iran. Visibility over ambiguity and immediacy over delay signal an active deterrence strategy of Iran in a new strategic environment characterised by confrontation. The implications of this transforming strategy are not only limited to Iran, but the regional countries, especially the Persian Gulf countries, need to adapt to this new reality as well. This shift further raises important questions such as the future of deterrence in the region, new security architecture, risks of nuclear proliferation, and prospects for stability in one of the world's most volatile regions.

¹⁰ Naim Tahir Baig, "Chokepoint as Weapon: Iran's Strait of Hormuz Blockade Strategy in the February–March 2026 War," *Journal of International Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2026): 1–24.

¹¹ Melissa M. Aigilo, *US-Israel-Iran Conflict Dynamics (2026): Proxy Systems, Deterrence Architecture, and Regional Stability Conditions* (Intelligence Assessment, April 2026). Passim. and also see: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 62–67.

Theoretical Basis and Key Concepts

Iran's shift from strategic patience to active deterrence can be understood by the synthesis of 'offensive realism and deterrence theory.' These together frame Iran's shift in policy not as an abrupt strategic rupture, but as a rational adaptation given the structural pressures. John Mearsheimer articulates that states operate on the logic of self-help, where survival is the primary goal.¹² When restraints or defensive posture fail to ensure security, then states are compelled to adopt a forward escalation or power-maximising behaviour.¹³ Iran's long-standing strategic patience was characterised by calibrated response and reliance on a proxy network to manage the conflict and avoid confrontation, with the fear of escalation. However, Iran faced repeated direct and indirect attacks from the U.S./Israel, regional isolation due to the weakening of its proxies and partners in the region, and erosion of deterrence credibility, which exposed the limitations of its strategic patience. In response, Iran abandoned its traditional policy and adopted active deterrence, which aligns with classical deterrence logic given by Thomas Schelling that emphasised the importance of a rapid, overt, and credible response.¹⁴ This involves a shift from ambiguity to over-signalling by firing an abundance of direct missiles and drones and showing willingness to engage on multiple fronts. This reflects a practical transition towards offensive realism as Iran, which is a relatively weaker conventional power compared to the U.S. and Israel, seeks to maximise its relative power. Iran has used regional networks, precision strike capabilities, and escalation management to broaden the battlespace. The implications of this shift were not only detrimental for Iran but also carried implications for West Asia as well. This doctrinal shift has created a security dilemma in the region. While Iran enhances its active deterrence posture, the regional countries will increase their defence spending, which will reinforce cycles of mutual mistrust and militarisation. As the threshold for the conflict has been lowered, active deterrence means rapid responses, which can increase the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Iran's adoption of active deterrence may restore temporary balance, but in the long run, it will create a volatile and competitive regional order.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 30–31.

¹³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 138.

¹⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 9–16, 35–43.

Ultimately, offensive realism and deterrence theory best explain Iran's policy shift as rational and structurally conditioned. It prioritises survival and credibility while carrying profound implications for the regional order.

Evolution of Strategic Behaviour

Iran's strategic doctrine before the 2026 war was the outcome of enduring structural constraints such as technological inferiority, economic sanctions, and isolation. In response to these limitations, Iran adopted a hybrid deterrence model based on four pillars: i. Proxy warfare, ii. Missile development, iii. Nuclear latency, and iv. Strategic ambiguity. All of these four factors became a point of contention between Iran and its adversaries. The proxy warfare in the region, combined with missile development and uranium enrichment, made Iran a rising threat to Israel and the U.S.¹⁵ Iran resorted to the strategy of escalation management while acquiring the capability to inflict disproportionate costs in case of an attack. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" acted both as a buffer and as a force multiplier, making Iran influential across the region, especially in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while keeping conflict distant from its own territory.¹⁶ This strategic culture was shaped by the 1980s war with Iraq, which taught the lesson that Iran should wage its war outside of its borders before it reaches its own territory. The formation of the Quds force, a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was for the same purpose: to fight Iran's enemies outside Iran's borders.¹⁷ However, the 2026 war pushed Iran to give up on its policy of strategic patience.

The 2026 war was not merely an armed escalation in West Asia but also a rupture in Iran's long-standing policy doctrine of calibrated escalation. The new policy is a more explicit and risk-acceptant approach that reflects loss of trust in strategic patience and doctrinal evolution.

¹⁵ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), 56-60.

¹⁷ Benjamin Scheller, "The Quds Force: Iran's Warriors Without Borders," *Al Gharaffa Strategic Institute*, June 2020, <https://agsi.org/series/the-quds-force-irans-warriors-without-borders/>

Iran's reaction to the U.S.-Israel attacks during the 2026 war is not a reactive adventurism but a gradual transition that has been underway since the late 2000s. This shift is further solidified by state-survival imperatives and shifting regional equilibrium.

For decades, Iran restricted its response to be indirect by projecting its power through its 'axis of resistance' formed by a nexus of Iran's allies, such as Hezbollah, Houthis, and Iraqi militias.¹⁸ The 'axis of resistance' served as an intermediary that prevented military conflict between Iran and its adversaries from turning into a full-scale war. Iran, through this approach, would inflict asymmetrical costs on the U.S. and Israel while still controlling the level of escalation. Even after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2020 and the 2025 Twelve-day war, Iran limited its response to calibrated retaliation. However, the February 2026 attacks on Iran, which aimed at leadership decapitation and nuclear rollback, altered Iran's threat perception. This war especially became the turning point because of the assassination of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and attacks on the core infrastructures.¹⁹ Another reason for this total loss of trust is the failure of diplomacy from the U.S. side, as claimed by the Iranians. The Iranians claim that the nuclear negotiations (2025 and early 2026) were moving in a positive direction, even though Iran was negotiating under military pressure from the U.S.²⁰ The U.S. and Iran were in advanced nuclear negotiations, but they eventually broke down because trust was low and the region was already undergoing a military build-up. This gave the impression to the Iranians that diplomacy or a restrained response would not be a rational choice in the case of a U.S.-Israel attack. All these factors, combined with repeated military engagements between Iran and its adversaries, gave it a reason to rethink its policy and abandon the logic of restraint. In response to the February 28, 2026, attack by the U.S.-Israel, Iran fired hundreds of missiles and drones targeting Israel and the U.S. bases

¹⁸ Murat Cingöz, Fulya Özkan, and Yavuz Selim Alkan, "Iran's Axis of Resistance through the Lens of Ontological Security," *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 13 (2024): 1963–1980.

¹⁹ Cornwell, Alexander, and Ronen Bergman. "How the Assault on Iran Unfolded," *Reuters*, March 1, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/>

²⁰ "Iran says 'Good Progress' Made in Nuclear Talks with the U.S. in Geneva," *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/18/irans-araghchi-hails-good-progress-in-nuclear-talks-with-us>

in the Persian Gulf states.²¹ This response was not only notable in terms of its scale but also for its overt nature. Iran's response was not merely emotional, but it was also structurally rational. Instead of treating war as a failure, it reset the conditions to avoid an unfavourable strategic environment. It was a "recalibration of the conflict" wherein expanding the theatre imposed costs on the adversaries.²² This involved attacking the U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf countries, most notably the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. naval facility in Bahrain.²³ Later on, the attacks reportedly also included the Persian Gulf energy infrastructures such as Qatar's Ras Laffan LNG complex and Mesaieed petrochemical facilities, Saudi Arabia's Jubail petrochemical complex and SAMREF refinery, the UAE's ADNOC-linked facilities such as the Al Hosn gas field and selected oil and petrochemical installations in Kuwait.²⁴ The most striking feature of this policy was the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has for years threatened to block the Strait, but it refrained from recognising the escalation risks. In 2026, however, it operationalised its threats in an unprecedented move to close the Strait and disrupt nearly one/fifth of global energy flows.²⁵ This was the manifestation of a shift from deterrence by denial to deterrence by engagement, which raised the costs of war high. The result was a global oil price surge, supply-

²¹ "Mapping U.S. and Israeli Attacks on Iran and Tehran's Retaliatory Strikes," *Al Jazeera*, February 28, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/28/mapping-us-and-israeli-attacks-on-iran-and-tehrans-retaliatory-strikes>

²² O. S. Qatrani, *War as a Strategic Calculation: Why Iran Broadened the Conflict* (SSRN Working Paper, 2026), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6335881

²³ Ahmad Sharawi, "Iran Continues Striking Civilian Infrastructure and US Bases in the Gulf (March 7–8 Updates)," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 8, 2026, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/03/08/iran-continues-striking-civilian-infrastructure-and-us-bases-in-the-gulf-march-7-8-updates/>

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Israel, Iran: Unlawful March Attacks on Energy Infrastructure," Human Rights Watch, April 22, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/22/israel-iran-unlawful-march-attacks-on-energy-infrastructure>

²⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Strait of Hormuz," *Today in Energy*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=65504>

chain disruption, and major powers like China were also drawn in for crisis management.²⁶

Another factor that has led to this change is the relative decline of Iran's proxies and allies in the region. Although groups such as Hezbollah and Hashad-al Shabi remained active in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively, the core military confrontation was state-to-state. This does not indicate that there is a total abandonment of proxy warfare, but rather the integration of "proxy warfare" elements into the broader strategy. Instead of acting predominantly, the proxies have now become a layer within a spectrum that includes cyber operations, maritime disruption, economic warfare, and direct kinetic confrontation. This has made the security dynamics more intricate.

Despite its strategic innovation, there are limits and risks associated with this change. Although Iran had extensive reserves of missile and drone arsenals, they are finite and have been significantly degraded by the strikes.²⁷ Economic weakness is exacerbated by war damages, sanctions, and blockade measures. Iran officially published its report on war damages, claiming that it suffered around US\$270 billion as a result of the war.²⁸ Moreover, this policy also carries the risk of miscalculation and results in overreach. The closure of Strait invited countermeasures in the form of a U.S. naval blockade, which could further isolate Iran or provoke a coalition response involving other countries like France and Britain to help the U.S. open the Strait of Hormuz. This policy raises costs for adversaries but also increases risks for Iran.²⁹

²⁶ "U.S. Imposes Naval Blockade on Iran as Trump Demands End to Nuclear Program," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/04/13/iran-blockade-us-trump-hormuz/>

²⁷ Sydney Laite, Haleigh Bartos, and Buckley DeJardin, "Tell Me How This Ends: Six Questions That Will Shape the Outcome of the U.S.-Israeli Operations Against Iran," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, March 4, 2026, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/tell-me-how-this-ends-six-questions-that-will-shape-the-outcome-of-the-us-israeli-operations-against-iran/>

²⁸ "Iranian Spokeswoman Estimates Damages of U.S.-Israeli War at US\$270 Billion," *Tasnim News Agency*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.tasnimnews.ir/en/news/2026/04/14/3565633/iranian-spokeswoman-estimates-damages-of-us-israeli-war-at-270-billion>

²⁹ United Kingdom Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Statement by President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer, Co-Chairs of the International Summit on the Strait of Hormuz: 17 April 2026" (London: Government of the United Kingdom, 2026). Also

The 2026 Rupture: War and Doctrinal Shift

The 2026 Iran war marked the most consequential doctrinal shift since the consolidation of the Islamic Republic post-Iraq War. For decades, Iran's security architecture was based on strategic patience designed to impose structural disadvantages on the U.S. and its regional allies. Yet the 2026 Iran war exposed the limits of strategic patience and triggered a shift towards a more reactive, overt, and risk-acceptant posture best understood as active deterrence.

The U.S.-Israel attacks against Iran that began on February 28, 2026, were not a single event that led to this significant shift. It was a triggering point, but a series of events and factors led to this realisation among the Iranian decision-makers. The dismantling and weakening of Iran's proxies and allies in the region was particularly consequential. The degradation of Iran's 'axis of resistance,' Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen, undermined Iran's indirect deterrence. At the same time, direct attacks on Iran's nuclear and missile facilities also created the assumption that its territory is not insulated from outside attacks. These events created pressure on Iran's strategic patience, which eventually completely eroded with large-scale U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran beginning February 28, 2026. The initial attacks decapitated Iran's top leadership and also assassinated the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Iran's response was immediate as it fired hundreds of missiles in a single day, not only aimed at the U.S. and Israel but also at their military assets in the region. Later on, Iranian attacks also included non-strategic targets in U.S.' ally countries, such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudia Arabia.

Iran's active deterrence is characterised by three features: i. Forward escalation, ii. Direct engagement, and iii. Economic disruption. Rather than giving a calibrated response to prevent the conflict escalation, Iran used escalation as a deterrence tool.³⁰ Since the beginning of the war, Iran has shown resolve and remained resilient. By taking measures like attacking

See: United Kingdom Ministry of Defence. "UK and France to Lead Multinational Strait of Hormuz Military Planning Conference." London: Ministry of Defence, April 22, 2026.

³⁰ Jonathan Whittall, "The End of Iran's Strategic Patience," *Al Jazeera*, March 6, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2026/3/6/the-end-of-irans-strategic-patience>

U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf countries and energy infrastructure, Iran showed that it has the will to widen and deepen the conflict. It was able to give a notable response and managed to drag the war over a few weeks. The Western or Israeli assessment, according to some reports, was that the war would be concluded within a day or two. However, Iran's military response made the war of attrition likely. Even after the assassination of top leadership, Iran was able to continue attacks primarily due to its military strategy of 'mosaic defence.'³¹ The mosaic defence concept has been developed over the past two decades, which is a decentralised command structure. Each province was made a semi-autonomous operational zone, acting on its own once the order for war was given. For every attack, the decentralised commands did not need approval. Each command centre could deliver a swift response in case of an attack in that region. Additionally, the Iranian political system is designed to ensure continuity despite targeted assassinations. Even after the assassination of the Commander-in-Chief (Supreme Leader) on the first day and other top military leadership, Iranian command-and-control remained functional and continued the war for weeks. It is a multi-layered system where if one layer is removed, the other one is ready to take over. This also showed that regime change in Iran is not as simple as it was perceived by the U.S. Moreover, Iran's strategic culture is such that it emphasises endurance over dominance. The aim is not to annihilate the enemy, but rather to focus on its own survival. Iran has been prepared for long war scenarios as it learnt during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Therefore, Iran does not aim to claim a quick win as compared to the Western preferences that seek rapid, decisive campaigns. Therefore, mosaic defence, leadership continuity, and endurance are the factors that have further solidified Iran's shift towards forward escalation.

As stated before, the weakening of Iran's proxy networks in the region has led it to play a more direct operational role, which is the second characteristic of Iran's shift towards active deterrence. It not only targeted the U.S. and Israeli interests but also the Persian Gulf countries, who, according to Iran, were complicit with the U.S.-Israel against Iran.

Thirdly, as part of an active deterrence strategy, Iran used economic disruptions as a strategic leverage; by closing the Strait of Hormuz, it targeted global energy flows. It pressured the U.S. to cease its attacks by

³¹ K. C. Monnappa, "Iran's Mosaic Defence: A New Doctrine in Evolving Warfare," ResearchGate Preprint, March 2026.

waging war against the global economy. When the war started, the U.S.'s war objectives included regime change and degrading Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities.³² But as the war progressed and Iran took control of the Strait of Hormuz, it became a top priority for the U.S. to open the strait.³³ It demanded that those vessels that want to cross the strait need to pay a toll to Iran, which it will use for war repatriations.³⁴ Iran's demand for charging toll remained a critical issue vis-à-vis peace negotiations with the U.S. as allowing it would mean giving control over the Strait of Hormuz to Iran, and hence, the 20% global oil.

Iran's deterrence was not only aimed at striking the targets but also causing systemic overload for the adversary. Iran used low-cost drones and ballistic missiles, which saturated the U.S. and Israel's missile defence systems. This created cost asymmetry since the interceptors that were used against Iranian low-priced drones and missiles often cost millions. This conflict has revealed a stark cost imbalance between the Iranian weapons and the U.S./Israeli interceptors. Iran's Shahed-136 drone costs roughly around US\$20,000-US\$50,000, or a short-range ballistic missile like Fateh-110 costs a few hundred thousand dollars. On the contrary, systems like Patriot missile cost around US\$4 million per shot, while a THAAD interceptor costs around US\$12-15 million.³⁵ The interceptors are not only expensive but finite as well, and also take time to produce. Therefore, the Iranian strategy did not involve battlefield victory, but rather exhausting the enemy's resources.

In the post-2026 war strategic environment, regional non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Houthis, and Iraqi militias are no longer just proxies

³² Michael Singh, "Assessing U.S. Progress in the Iran War," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 6, 2026,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-us-progress-iran-war>

³³ Anthony H. Cordesman and Clayton Seigle, "The Risks of Conflict in the Gulf: Securing the Strait of Hormuz," U.S. Naval War College Review, 2026.

³⁴ Keith Johnson, "Iran Is Putting a 'Toll Booth' in the Strait of Hormuz," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2026.

³⁵ Daniel Fiott, "The New Economics of Warfare: Cheap Drones and Expensive Interceptors," European Policy Centre, March 9, 2026, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/the-new-economics-of-warfare/>

but a part of Iran's pressure architecture.³⁶ Iran has integrated all of its fronts into a single battlefield with coordinated attacks by its non-state allies in the region. This forced enemies to defend themselves across multiple theatres. In addition to this, Iran gave pre-emptive threats that escalation against it would produce irreversible consequences and even acted accordingly instead of issuing rhetorical threats. It threatened to attack critical infrastructure such as energy hubs, desalination plants, ports, and oil refineries to show the U.S./Israel that Iranian attacks will not only cause immediate destruction but future instability as well.

Therefore, all these factors indicate that there is a shift in Iran's strategy where it has abandoned its policy of strategic patience and adopted active deterrence by projecting forward escalation, direct engagement, and economic disruption. Through such active deterrence, Iran acquired some of its strategic objectives by imposing its conditions in the MoU with the U.S.³⁷ Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Speaker of the Parliament of Iran and chief negotiator of Iran, posted on his X handle that "We seize concessions not through dialogue, but with missiles..."³⁸ This change is not only detrimental for Iran but will also reorder the West Asian security.

Reordering the West Asia Security Architecture

The 2026 Iran war has altered the security architecture of West Asia because it transformed the credibility and logic of regional security provision. It eroded the long-standing assumption that the U.S.'s extended deterrence over the Persian Gulf states would shield them from direct attacks.³⁹ While the defence system of the U.S. and its allies mitigated

³⁶ Michael Young, "Iran Rewrites Its War Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 30, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2026/03/iran-rewrites-its-war-strategy>

³⁷ Priyanka Shankar, "What's Iran's 14-point Proposal to End the War? And Will Trump Accept It?" *Al Jazeera*, May 3, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/3/whats-irans-14-point-proposal-to-end-the-war-and-will-trump-accept-it>

³⁸ <https://x.com/i/status/2060338759321715058>

³⁹ "The Iran War Has Forced the US–Gulf Alliance Out of the Shadows," Atlantic Council, April 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-iran-war-has-forced-the-us-gulf-alliance-out-of-the-shadows/>

physical damage to the bases and infrastructure in the region, the primary assumption that an external attack cannot happen has eroded. Even though there was limited penetration of Iranian missiles and drones, a significant number of strikes hit the targets. These limited successful strikes caused enough damage to the Persian Gulf states that they need to rethink their security architecture. Thomas Schelling emphasised that deterrence does not depend on capability, but rather on credibility, which was tested during the 2026 Iran war.⁴⁰

The immediate implication would be a transition from dependence on external security guarantees to the development of indigenous defence capabilities. This means that militarisation in the region will be on the rise with increased investments in missile defence, counter-drone systems, and strong infrastructure. For decades, Persian Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE remained under implicit protection of the U.S., but the 2026 Iran war depicted that no node is immune from disruption.

One of the defining features of this war was the expansion of targets in terms of geography. Conflict no longer remained limited to traditional frontlines (Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen) but also involved the Persian Gulf states (KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar), which remained immune from attacks in previous conflicts between Iran and the U.S.-Israel. This feature is the manifestation of Iran's adoption of a strategy of forward escalation involving the U.S.'s regional allies. Lawrence Freedman also argues that contemporary deterrence works through the expansion of geographical targets, which was confirmed by the 2026 war in West Asia.⁴¹ In such a security environment, strategic depth is not a guarantee for security; rather, it becomes a vulnerability as the U.S. bases and military assets are attacked across the region.

Weaponisation of the energy domain will become a central pillar of this reconfigured architecture. The vulnerability of the Strait of Hormuz was not only theoretical (as Iran threatened to block it in the past) but was operationally demonstrated through disruption scenarios. The Strait of Hormuz became an active component of Iran's deterrence strategy rather

⁴⁰ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 35–45.

⁴¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 611–620.

than a passive economic asset. In this scenario, Persian Gulf states face a paradox, i.e., their economic centrality makes them important globally but also makes them economically vulnerable due to exposure to foreign attacks.

The West Asian region will now experience diversification of partnerships and a multi-vector security strategy due to credibility shock to U.S. security guarantees. This does not mean that the U.S. is no longer a dominant military power in the region, but the regional countries will seek engagement with alternative powers such as China and Russia to offset uncertainty. However, Russia and China cannot become security guarantors in West Asia. Russia does not have the required political or strategic clout in the region, especially after the fall of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.⁴² China, on the other hand, is very cautious of getting involved in the West Asian conflict.⁴³ Nevertheless, both China and Russia can play a diplomatic role, particularly as mediators. A regional security alliance comprising of regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Egypt could emerge, leading to militarisation of West Asia. Apart from new regional countries' alliances, Pakistan and Turkey could emerge as net stability providers in the region. Turkey is more directly involved in West Asia with a strong military (the second largest in NATO), geographical proximity, and active military footprints.⁴⁴ It has existing involvement in West Asia with operations in Syria, presence in Iraq (30-40 km security corridor in Northern Iraq), and a military base in Qatar.⁴⁵ Turkey and Qatar signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2014 formally implemented in 2016, which legalised Turkish troop deployment in Qatar and joint training and exercises. The agreement also led to the establishment of Tariq bin Ziyad military base in Qatar which is Turkey's

⁴² Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia's Shrinking Role in the West Asia After Syria's Political Transition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2026.

⁴³ Mathew Jie Sheng Yeo, "The Iran-Israel-US War Is Exposing China's Alliance Problem," The Diplomat, March 16, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/the-iran-israel-us-war-is-exposing-chinas-alliance-problem/>

⁴⁴ "Turkey in the West Asia: Expanding Military Footprint and Regional Influence," International Crisis Group, 2026, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/turkey-middle-east-military-footprint-regional-influence>

⁴⁵ "Turkey's Security Zone in Northern Syria: Goals and Limits," International Crisis Group, October 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/turkey-security-zone-northern-syria-goals-and-limits>

only fully functional overseas military base in the Persian Gulf.⁴⁶ Turkey also has defence cooperation agreements with Saudi Arabia since 2016, Kuwait since 2018, and recently had defence MOUs with the UAE in 2022-2023.⁴⁷

Turkey is pursuing Neo-Ottomanism as a foreign policy orientation, which is associated with its efforts to expand its political, economic, cultural, and security influence in regions historically connected to the Ottoman Empire, particularly the Middle East, Balkans, and Eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁸ Turkey's policy during the 2026 Iran war represented a strategy of regional balancing, combining diplomatic mediation with efforts to strengthen economic and security partnerships in the Persian Gulf. Ankara sought to prevent a wider war while positioning itself as a necessary regional actor capable of facilitating communication between competing powers.⁴⁹ However, Turkey's hard military pacts, its deployment in Qatar, and its relations with Israel reduce its credibility as a neutral mediator.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Pakistan aligns much closer with the Persian Gulf countries and has working relations with Iran. It has a large experienced military, strong ties with regional countries, and is seen as less interventionist as it avoids direct involvement in conflicts like Iran versus the Persian Gulf countries or other regional disputes. It has a strategic mutual defence agreement (SMDA) with Saudi Arabia, signed on September 17, 2025. It states that aggression against one nation is considered aggression against both.⁵¹ Moreover, the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) is a Saudi-led alliance, and Pakistan is also part of it. It comprises forty one nations and involves cooperation in domains such as ideology,

⁴⁶ "Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command at Tariq bin Ziyad Military Base," Defense Turkey, 2019, <https://defenceturkey.com/news/the-state-of-qatar-and-qatar-armed-forces>

⁴⁷ "Turkey and the Gulf: Security Cooperation, Military Industry, and Strategic Recalibration," International Crisis Group, 2026.

⁴⁸ Ömer Taşpınar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

⁴⁹ Galip Dalay, "As Iran War Reshapes the Middle East, Turkey's Regional Role Looks Set to Expand," Chatham House, June 5, 2026; Karol Wasilewski, "Turkey and the Persian Gulf: High Hopes, Limited Capabilities," Centre for Eastern Studies, June 3, 2026.

⁵⁰ Aaron Stein, "Turkey-Israel Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Managed Rivalry," Carnegie West Asia Center, 2023-2026.

⁵¹ "Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," Joint Communiqué, Riyadh, September 17, 2025.

communications, counter-terrorist financing, and military.⁵² Pakistan is a neighbour of Iran and has good bilateral relations with it; therefore, Pakistan could act as a neutral and net stability provider in West Asia.

Apart from forming alliances outside the region, in the post-U.S. withdrawal period, the Persian Gulf region can also cooperate closely and work under a framework for future joint security initiatives. This can include Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Jordan, and the UAE. Iran must be part of this framework so that in the future it does not attack the West Asian countries in case of aggression from Israel. Moreover, the other countries in the alliance can make sure that their territory is not used against Iran by the U.S. or Israel. However, the problem with this arrangement will be consensus-building. Oman usually tries to act neutral and play a mediatory role. Moreover, the UAE, Jordan, and Bahrain are more closely aligned with Israel, making it difficult for them to normalise relations with Iran. Turkey may pursue its own objectives in the region and, therefore, is not viewed to be an unbiased partner. For Pakistan, it would be a strategic and diplomatic challenge to maintain balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In this scenario, the future of West Asian security will rest on adaptive strategies to manage risks instead of eliminating them. The region will remain volatile since the deterrence factor has broken down, and there is a realisation among the regional states that they need to invest in indigenous defence capabilities instead of relying on an external security provider such as the U.S. Therefore, the West Asian countries will invest in defence capabilities, form new alliances, and cooperate in limited capacity to safeguard their interests.

Conclusion

Iran's shift from strategic patience to active deterrence is not merely a tactical adjustment, but it represents a structural transformation in how Iran perceives threats, credibility, and ensures survival within the increasingly volatile

⁵² "About IMCTC," Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017–2026, <https://imctc.org>

regional environment. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has relied on calibrated responses and indirect confrontation to manage conflict with the U.S. and Israel. However, its doctrine of strategic patience eroded under the weight of military pressure, leader decapitation campaigns, and successive confrontations with the U.S. and Israel. With the latest war with the U.S. and Israel, the Iranian civil and military realised that restraint does not guarantee security, but instead invites more escalation. Therefore, the transformation to active deterrence reflects a shift from ambiguity and endurance to visibility and immediacy. Instead of relying on “forward defence,” now Iran has resorted to “forward escalation.” Iran in the 2026 war showed willingness to employ direct, overt, and geographically expansive force. Despite the decapitation of its top political and military leadership, Iran retaliated aggressively, which ultimately resulted in the retreat of the U.S. from its objectives based on ‘regime change’ in Iran, and it compelled U.S. President Donald Trump to sign the MoU with Iran, which largely looked in favour of Iran.

For Iran, active deterrence is not only reactive but also pre-emptive, shaping the adversaries’ expectations before the conflict fully unfolds. Iran’s move towards active deterrence also represents its loss of trust in traditional diplomatic frameworks. As coercive signalling replaces strategic patience, the space of negotiations diminishes. Now the region seems to be entering a new phase where the competition is not managed, but rather defined by brinkmanship and episodic escalation.

The implications for West Asia are profound and destabilising, especially due to the erosion of indirect conflict management, which has increased the likelihood of direct state-to-state confrontation. The war, which was once fought in the shadows, has become more overt due to reduced opportunities for diplomatic de-escalation. The geographical scope of the conflict has also expanded. During the war, Iran has demonstrated the capabilities to strike multiple theatres. This doctrinal shift is also creating a regional security dilemma. The Persian Gulf states, which were attacked by Iran, will now seek increments in their own indigenous military capabilities. Renewed security partnerships and adoption of assertive postures by the Persian Gulf states could also become a new trend. The result would be a spiral of militarisation that would contribute to instability instead of establishing deterrence in the region. Tensions surrounding critical chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz,

have highlighted the close link between the energy and economic sectors and deterrence strategies.

Ultimately, Iran's doctrinal transformation is not just a cause but a driver of West Asia's evolving strategic landscape. It reflects a system in which the traditional equilibrium has eroded, and a new one is emerging. In the coming years, the defining question will be whether active deterrence will stabilise the environment by deterring escalation or further lead to broader conflict.