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The Implications of the USA / Israeli War with Iran on Global Peace

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the structural dynamics of the military confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran during *Operation Epic Fury* and evaluates its implications for the evolving international order. Drawing on hegemonic transition theory and alliance politics, the study investigates whether the conflict represents a precursor to systemic great-power war or a catalyst for the transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar global system.

Design/methodology/approach – The research adopts a qualitative case study approach based on documentary analysis. It integrates theoretical perspectives from hegemonic transition theory and alliance politics to interpret geopolitical developments, alliance behavior, and strategic interactions among major powers. Policy statements, strategic documents, and contemporary geopolitical developments are analyzed to identify emerging patterns in the international system.

Findings – The analysis indicates that the conflict has intensified strategic realignments rather than creating the conditions for a conventional global war. The crisis has exposed growing divergences within the transatlantic alliance, reflecting increasing strategic autonomy among several European states. At the same time, Russia and China have adopted distinct strategic responses shaped by their respective geopolitical and economic interests rather than forming a unified anti-Western bloc. The disruption of energy supply routes has further demonstrated the vulnerability of the global economy to regional conflicts, reinforcing the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints and energy security. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited to a single geopolitical case and relies on documentary evidence available during the period examined. Because international crises evolve rapidly, subsequent developments may alter strategic assessments. Future research should incorporate longitudinal analysis and comparative studies of major-power crises. **Originality/value** – This study contributes to contemporary international relations scholarship by integrating hegemonic transition theory with alliance politics to explain how regional conflicts can accelerate systemic transformation. It argues that the emerging international order is characterized less by renewed bipolarity than by the growing influence of multiple regional powers operating within an increasingly multipolar strategic environment.

Keywords: Third World War; Trump Interventionism; New World Order; NATO Fragmentation; Iran-US Conflict; Multipolarity; Strait of Hormuz; Great Power Competition.

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Introduction.

Since February 2026, the Middle East has witnessed the most significant military escalation since the 2003 Iraq War. The Trump administration, in coordination with Israel, launched "Operation Epic Fury", a sustained military campaign against Iran resulting in the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The opening simultaneous salvo by the US and Israel caused stupendous casualties, displaced millions, and destroyed several infrastructures in Iran, which triggered a barrage of retaliatory missile and drone attacks against US military bases across the Gulf-region and Israel by Iran, leaving thousands of people dead in Israel.

This escalation occurs within a broader context of global systemic transformation. The post-Cold War unipolar moment, characterised by undisputed American primacy, has been eroding for two decades. The 2008 financial crisis, the botched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of China, and the COVID-19 pandemic have each chipped away at US hegemony. According to data from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States accounted for approximately half of global economic output in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War but represented roughly one-quarter of global GDP by 2024, reflecting the diffusion of economic power to emerging economies, particularly China and other Asian states [1].

Statement of the Problem

The international system is undergoing a profound transformation characterised by declining U.S. hegemonic dominance, rising multipolarity, and increasing geopolitical volatility [2]. The resurgence of interventionist and unilateral foreign policy under Donald Trump has accelerated debates about the prospect of large-scale global conflict.

Historically, systemic wars have emerged during periods of hegemonic transition and institutional breakdown. The collapse of cooperative frameworks, combined with aggressive power projection, creates conditions analogous to pre-World War I and II dynamics [3].

The central paradox animating this inquiry can be stated as follows: despite significant military escalation against Iran, including the assassination of its supreme leader and senior security commanders, sustained aerial bombardment and pressure on critical maritime routes, the United States has failed to secure either regime change or Iranian capitulation. Simultaneously, its traditional NATO allies have publicly demonstrated varying degrees of reluctance toward direct participation, while major strategic rivals such as Russia and China have pursued divergent strategic responses.

This situation raises fundamental questions about the prospect of systemic great-power war [4]. Is the Iran crisis a precursor to a Third World War – a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia or China? Or does it represent a more complex transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order characterised by fragmented and diffused conflict?

Recent evidence suggests that military actions affecting maritime trade routes in the Strait of Hormuz have heightened global tensions, disrupted energy supplies, and generated significant economic uncertainty worldwide. Additionally, legal scholars have raised concerns that threats against civilian infrastructure and restrictions on maritime navigation may pose serious challenges to established principles of international law and freedom of navigation.

Research Questions

This paper addresses three interconnected questions:

1. What are the strategic calculations and constraints of the major actors involved in the Iran crisis - the United States, Israel, European NATO allies, Russia, and China?
2. Does the current configuration of forces suggest an increased probability of great-power war, or does it indicate a transformation like global conflict?
3. What are the contours of the "emerging new world order" as revealed by the crisis?

Theoretical Framework: Hegemonic Transition and Multipolarity

This analysis draws on hegemonic transition theory, which posits that systemic wars become more likely when a rising power challenges an established hegemon [5]. However, the current situation complicates this framework. Rather than a single rising challenger (China), the international system is witnessing multiple power centers, including China, Russia, India, North Korea, Iran, Turkey, and a partially integrated Europe, each pursuing autonomous strategies.

Scholars of multipolarity [6] suggest that multipolar systems can be either stable or unstable depending on alliance configurations and the distribution of capabilities. The current moment is characterised by "ambiguous multipolarity," in which there are no clear alliance blocs, overlapping interests, and significant divergence within traditional alliance structures (such as NATO).

Literature Review

Theories of Systemic War

The concept of "world war" emerged from the unique configuration of European great powers in the early twentieth century, characterised by rigid alliance blocs, colonial rivalries, and industrial-scale mobilisation capabilities [7]. Contemporary scholars generally agree that the conditions for a replay of 1914 or 1939 do not currently exist: nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and the absence of rigid bipolar alliance structures militate against total great-power war [8].

However, "hybrid warfare" combining conventional military action, cyber operations, economic coercion, and proxy conflicts has become the dominant mode of great-power competition [9]. The Iran crisis exhibits all these elements.

US Middle East Policy and the Trump Doctrine

The Trump administration's Middle East policy has been characterized by what analysts term "maximum pressure" combined with unpredictable escalation thresholds [10]. Unlike the Obama administration's negotiated approach (the JCPOA), Trump has favored confrontation, including the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 and, more recently, Supreme Leader Khamenei in 2026.

Several European analysts argue that Trump's foreign policy approach has exacerbated existing transatlantic disagreements over security commitments, burden sharing, and approaches to international crises [11].

The Emerging Multi-Polar Order

Scholars of international relations have extensively documented the transition from unipolarity (1991-2008) to an emerging multi-polar configuration [12]. Key features include: the rise of China as an economic peer-competitor; Russia's resurgence as a military power; the diffusion of economic power to emerging markets (Brazil, India, Turkey, Indonesia); and the relative decline of the US economic share of global GDP from 50% to 24%.

However, multi-polarity does not automatically produce stability. The interwar period (1919-1939) demonstrates that multi-polar systems can be highly unstable when major powers lack institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution. The current crisis reveals the fragility of existing institutions – the UN Security Council, NATO, the G7 – in managing great-power rivalry.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design, using the Iran crisis (February-April 2026) as a critical case for examining great-power dynamics and systemic transition. The case is "critical" in Yin's (2018) sense because it tests theoretical propositions about multi-polar stability, alliance cohesion, and hegemonic decline under conditions of active military conflict.

Data Sources

Data are drawn from four categories:

1. Official statements and government communications: White House press releases, Pentagon announcements, statements from European foreign ministries, Kremlin communiqués, and Chinese Foreign Ministry declarations.
2. Major media reports: Coverage from CNN, Asia Times, Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, The Jerusalem Post, and AFP/BSS news wires.
3. Analytical reports: Publications from the CNA Corporation (a US federally funded research and development center) and expert analyses from academic institutions.
4. Public opinion data: YouGov (UK), 40dB (Spain), and ARD (Germany) surveys on European attitudes toward the war.

Limitations

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the conflict is ongoing, and information remains incomplete—battlefield assessments, casualty figures, and diplomatic communications are subject to strategic distortion. Second, access to primary sources (internal government deliberations) is impossible. Third, the analysis necessarily involves probabilistic judgments about future developments.

Result and Discussion

The US-Israeli Campaign: Strategic Objectives and Constraints

Operation Epic Fury: Origins and Execution

The current war began with the launch of Operation Epic Fury, a coordinated United States-Israeli military campaign against Iran on 28 February 2026. The opening wave of nearly 900 strikes targeted Iranian military infrastructure, missile systems, nuclear facilities, and senior leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who was killed during the initial

assault [13]. The stated objectives of the campaign were to induce regime change, dismantle Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and terminate Tehran's support for regional proxy organizations. Despite the scale and intensity of the operation, six weeks into the campaign, these objectives remained largely unfulfilled.

The Iranian regime, "though badly battered, has not collapsed." Rather than capitulating, Tehran mounted a substantial retaliatory response involving hundreds of missiles and thousands of drones directed at Israeli, American, and allied targets across the region. The conflict resulted in enormous destruction, significant casualties in Iran, Lebanon, Israel, and the Gulf states, and the displacement of millions of civilians. Furthermore, Hezbollah entered the conflict within days of the initial strikes, while the Houthi movement resumed attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, thereby expanding the geographical scope of the war and increasing regional instability.

The Naval Blockade: Escalation or Desperation?

On 13 April 2026, following the collapse of peace negotiations in Islamabad, President Donald Trump ordered a naval blockade of Iranian ports. The United States military announced that the blockade would commence at 10:00 a.m. ET and would target "any ships trying to enter, or leave" Iranian ports through the Strait of Hormuz [14].

The blockade represented a major escalation in the conflict. Strategically, the Strait of Hormuz is among the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, carrying approximately one-fifth of global petroleum consumption and over one-quarter of seaborne oil trade [15]. The announcement triggered immediate disruptions in global energy markets, with oil prices rising sharply as traders anticipated prolonged supply constraints. Analysts warned that elevated energy prices could persist well beyond the cessation of hostilities because damage to energy infrastructure and disruptions to maritime shipping networks would require considerable time and investment to repair [16].

Iran's response was equally uncompromising. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) asserted that Iranian forces maintained "full control" over the Strait of Hormuz and warned that hostile actors attempting to challenge Iranian authority in the waterway would become trapped in a "deadly vortex." Such rhetoric underscored Tehran's determination to resist coercive measures and highlighted the growing risk of a broader regional confrontation involving global energy security [17].

The Negotiation Failure: Maximalist Demands versus Strategic Reality

The Islamabad peace talks represented the highest-level direct engagement between Washington and Tehran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Convened on 11–12 April 2026, the negotiations sought to end the war, reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and establish a framework for regional stability. However, after twenty-one hours of deliberations, the talks concluded without agreement [18].

The United States reportedly demanded a comprehensive cessation of uranium enrichment activities, the dismantlement of major enrichment facilities, the transfer of highly enriched uranium stockpiles, the termination of support for allied militant organizations, and unrestricted navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Conversely, Tehran demanded recognition of its authority over the Strait, war reparations, and a broader regional ceasefire that included Lebanon. These positions reflected fundamentally incompatible strategic objectives, with each side seeking outcomes that the other regarded as unacceptable. As one observer noted, the American position resembled that of a maximalist power demanding the capitulation of an adversary that had not been decisively defeated.

The deeper obstacle to compromise lies in the Iranian leadership's perception of the conflict. From Tehran's perspective, surrender is not merely a political concession but a threat to regime survival. The ruling elite views the loss of power as potentially resulting in persecution, prosecution, and physical elimination. Consequently, the conflict assumes the characteristics of a zero-sum struggle in which compromise is equated with existential defeat. Under such conditions, diplomatic settlements become exceedingly difficult to achieve, regardless of the costs imposed by continued warfare.

European NATO Allies: The Great Refusal

"This Conflict Has Nothing to Do with NATO"

Perhaps the most significant geopolitical consequence of the Iran crisis has been the unprecedented reluctance of key European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to support or participate in the US-led military campaign. Unlike previous interventions in which alliance solidarity was more evident, European governments have consistently emphasized that the conflict does not fall within NATO's collective defense obligations [19].

As one European parliamentary official summarized, "Spain closes its airspace, Italy refuses to allow fighter jets to land, Germany directly states 'this

conflict has nothing to do with NATO’ –European countries are collectively saying ‘no’ to the United States.” This response reflects growing European concerns regarding strategic autonomy, escalation risks, and the absence of a broad international consensus supporting military action against Iran.

The legal basis for this refusal is equally significant. According to European security analysts, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty—the alliance’s collective defense clause—can only be invoked when a member state has been attacked. Since neither the United States nor any NATO member was subjected to an Iranian attack before the commencement of hostilities, the legal threshold for collective defense was not met. Moreover, several European leaders complained that Washington did not adequately consult alliance partners before launching the operation, leaving many governments to learn of the decision through media reports rather than formal diplomatic channels.

National Positions: A Spectrum of Defiance

European responses have ranged from diplomatic distancing to measures that effectively constrained American operational flexibility.

- Spain adopted one of the strongest positions by reportedly restricting the use of its airspace and military facilities for operations connected to the conflict. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez publicly described the war as a “big mistake,” reflecting Madrid’s opposition to further escalation.
- Italy refused requests for its military facilities to be used in offensive operations against Iran. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni informed parliament that “we are not in a state of war and do not want to enter a state of war,” emphasizing Italy’s preference for diplomatic solutions.
- France adopted a more conditional approach, reportedly permitting certain logistical support only under strict guarantees that French territory would not be used directly for offensive strikes. President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly emphasized that “this is not our operation,” underscoring Paris’s desire to avoid direct involvement.
- Germany articulated perhaps the clearest rejection of participation. German officials repeatedly stressed that the conflict was unrelated to NATO’s collective defense mission. Berlin also expressed concerns regarding escalation risks and the absence of a clear end-state strategy for the campaign (Al Jazeera, 2026).

- Poland reportedly declined requests to redeploy Patriot missile defense systems to the Middle East, arguing that national defense requirements took precedence. Polish officials maintained that protecting Poland's own security environment remained their foremost responsibility.
- The United Kingdom adopted a cautious position, seeking to avoid direct military entanglement while balancing its strategic partnership with Washington. Reports suggested that British security institutions limited certain forms of intelligence cooperation related to offensive operations, reflecting concerns over escalation and alliance cohesion.

Collectively, these national positions reveal an emerging pattern of strategic divergence within the transatlantic alliance. The reluctance of major European powers to support the campaign against Iran reflects broader concerns regarding unilateral military action, regional destabilization, and the long-term implications of a conflict whose objectives remain uncertain. In this sense, the Iran crisis has exposed not only the limits of American coercive power but also growing fractures within the Western security architecture itself [20].

Public Opinion: European Populations Reject the War

The caution exhibited by European governments is closely aligned with prevailing public sentiment across the continent. Polling data conducted in major European states indicate a consistent majority opposition to military involvement in the Iran conflict. Surveys conducted by YouGov in the United Kingdom, ARD in Germany, and 40dB in Spain reveal that opposition to the war significantly outweighs public support, reflecting widespread skepticism regarding the strategic necessity and potential consequences of military escalation [21].

Table 1. *Public Opinion on the War by Country and Polling Firm*

Country	Polling Firm	Oppose War	Support War
United Kingdom	YouGov	49%	28%
Spain	40dB	68%	—
Germany	ARD	58%	25%

Source: *Compiled from media reports and national opinion surveys*

Public resistance is informed by Europe's recent historical experiences with military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia. As one Slovak analyst observed, "Europe has painful lessons – Iraq War, Afghanistan War – that brought instability, immigration problems, and economic difficulties." From this perspective, many Europeans question why they should bear the political, economic, and humanitarian consequences of conflicts that neither originated on European soil nor directly advance European strategic interests. Consequently, public opinion has become a significant constraint on policymakers contemplating deeper involvement in the conflict [22].

Strategic Implications: The End of Atlanticism?

The Iran crisis has exposed what many observers consider the most serious transatlantic rupture since the 2003 Iraq War and arguably one of the deepest divisions since the establishment of NATO in 1949. The reluctance of major European allies to support the US-led campaign reflects growing doubts regarding American strategic judgment and the future direction of the alliance. As one French military official reportedly told parliament, "We can no longer maintain the same level of trust in the security commitments provided by the United States [23]."

The depth of concern is further illustrated by warnings from senior NATO figures. A former deputy commander of NATO's Allied Command Europe argued that alliance participation in the Iran war would resemble "buying a ticket to board the Titanic as it begins to sink," emphasizing fears that the conflict could entangle Europe in a costly and strategically unwinnable confrontation [24].

Perhaps the most significant long-term consequence has been the acceleration of debates surrounding European "strategic autonomy" – the ability of European states to defend their interests independently of American military leadership. Finnish President Alexander Stubb has publicly discussed the emergence of a "more Europeanised NATO," while several European policymakers have advocated stronger EU defense integration [25]. Similarly, former Romanian President Traian Băsescu argued that Europe must develop an independent military capability and gradually reduce its reliance on American security guarantees [26].

Nevertheless, significant structural constraints remain. European armed forces continue to depend heavily on the United States for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), strategic airlift, missile defense, and extended nuclear deterrence. Consequently, while the current crisis has stimulated a genuine "European awakening," the continent remains far from achieving full strategic independence. The Iran war has therefore highlighted both Europe's

growing desire for autonomy and the enduring realities of military dependence on the United States [27].

Russia: The Reluctant Beneficiary

Strategic Calculus: Why Russia Supports (but Does Not Join) the War

Russia's position in the Iran crisis appears paradoxical. On the one hand, Moscow has strongly condemned the US-Israeli military campaign and reportedly provided Iran with intelligence support, drone-related technology, and strategic advice. According to reports by The Wall Street Journal, Russian assistance has enhanced Iran's ability to sustain military operations despite significant battlefield losses [28]. This assessment was reinforced by CIA Director John Ratcliffe, who confirmed that both Russia and China were sharing intelligence information with Iran during the conflict [29].

On the other hand, Russia has deliberately avoided direct military intervention. The January 2025 Russia-Iran Strategic Partnership Treaty does not contain a mutual defense clause, meaning that Moscow was under no legal obligation to intervene following the outbreak of war. This contrasts sharply with Russia's treaty relationship with North Korea, which includes explicit military commitments [30].

Russia's strategic calculations appear to be shaped by three principal considerations.

Economic Benefits. The war has driven global oil prices above \$100 per barrel, generating substantial revenue for Russia as one of the world's leading energy exporters. Additionally, disruptions in global energy markets have created opportunities for Russian crude exports, particularly in Asian markets where sanctions enforcement has become more flexible [31].

Geopolitical Distraction. The conflict has shifted Washington's strategic attention away from Ukraine. As the Trump administration focuses resources and diplomatic capital on Iran, pressure on Moscow regarding the Ukraine conflict has diminished. Furthermore, military resources allocated to Operation Epic Fury have reduced the quantity of equipment available for transfer to Kyiv [32].

Limited Liability. By providing intelligence, technological assistance, and diplomatic support without committing combat forces, Russia can strengthen its partnership with Iran while avoiding direct military confrontation with the United States. This approach enables Moscow to maximize strategic benefits while minimizing risks.

The Limits of Russian Support

Despite these advantages, prolonged conflict presents growing risks for Russia. Some analysts argue that Ukraine may exploit the situation by demonstrating expertise in drone defense technologies to Gulf States seeking enhanced security capabilities. Such cooperation could generate new sources of political and military support for Kyiv while strengthening Ukraine's diplomatic standing in the Middle East [33].

Moreover, Gulf governments may increasingly perceive Russia as part of the regional security challenge because it supported Iran. Such perceptions could encourage greater alignment with Western sanctions regimes and reduce Moscow's influence among key energy-producing states [34].

Russian commentators have also expressed dissatisfaction with China's cautious response to the conflict. Several Moscow-based analysts have criticized Beijing for maintaining a passive stance despite its close partnership with Tehran. One expert argued that China lacked meaningful leverage because of its dependence on Persian Gulf trade routes, while another contended that Beijing preferred a strategy that minimized short-term costs rather than demonstrating the assertiveness expected of a major power [35].

Against this backdrop, President Vladimir Putin has sought to position Russia as a diplomatic intermediary. During discussions with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Putin indicated that Moscow was "ready to help mediate" efforts to end the conflict. This approach allows Russia to project itself as a responsible global actor while avoiding direct military entanglement [36].

China: The Reluctant Mediator

China's Economic Vulnerability

China's approach to the Iran crisis is fundamentally shaped by its extensive economic exposure to the Persian Gulf. Unlike Russia, which benefits from rising energy prices, China is the world's largest importer of energy and therefore bears high costs from disruptions to regional trade and shipping routes [37].

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz threatens not only energy supplies but also broader industrial production. Although China possesses strategic petroleum reserves estimated to sustain domestic demand for several months, numerous critical supply chains remain vulnerable. Approximately half of China's sulfur imports originate from Gulf producers, making fertilizer production susceptible to disruption during key agricultural seasons. Equally significant, China obtains much of its helium supply from Qatar, a resource that

is essential for semiconductor manufacturing and other advanced industrial applications. Consequently, the conflict poses a direct threat to China's economic growth, industrial competitiveness, and technological development objectives.

Diplomatic Response: Mediation, Not Military Support

In response to the conflict, China has consistently emphasized diplomacy and de-escalation. Foreign Minister Wang Yi condemned the use of force, arguing that military action "cannot truly solve problems" and urging all parties to exercise restraint [38]. China also joined Russia in requesting an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council to address the deteriorating security situation.

However, Beijing has explicitly rejected military involvement. As one Chinese academic explained in an interview with Al Jazeera, "The Chinese government always adheres to not interfering in other countries' issues," adding that China was unlikely to provide weapons to Iran. Instead, Beijing has focused on diplomatic engagement with Washington, Tehran, and Gulf governments in an effort to prevent further escalation.

This position reflects a pragmatic strategic calculation. According to a Singapore-based analyst, China increasingly views itself as a stabilizing actor whose primary objective is to prevent a regional collapse that could threaten its economic interests and long-term development goals [39].

The China-Russia Divergence

Perhaps the most consequential geopolitical development arising from the crisis is the growing divergence between Chinese and Russian interests. As an analysis by CNA concluded, "Despite their common political stance on American and Israeli intervention, practical realities of the conflict have laid bare some of the fault lines in Sino-Russian relations."

These differences are rooted in structural realities. Russia benefits economically and strategically from a prolonged conflict through higher energy prices and reduced Western attention to Ukraine. China, by contrast, incurs high economic costs from continued instability in the Gulf and therefore has a strong interest in restoring regional stability as quickly as possible.

Chinese officials have openly acknowledged the independent nature of their relationship with Moscow. In March 2026, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that "China and Russia are strategically independent. We always respect each other's core interests, do not impose our will and agenda on each other, and adhere to the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third parties."

For many observers, this language contrasts sharply with the “no-limits partnership” proclaimed by Beijing and Moscow in February 2022. The Iran crisis has therefore revealed that, despite their shared opposition to American influence, China and Russia continue to pursue distinct strategic priorities shaped by their differing economic and geopolitical interests.

The Emerging New World Order

From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Empirical Indicators

The Iran crisis provides compelling evidence that the contemporary international system is undergoing a profound structural transition. Several empirical indicators suggest the gradual erosion of the post-Cold War unipolar order and the emergence of a more complex multipolar environment.

Economic Power Diffusion. The relative economic dominance of the United States has declined significantly over the past seven decades. Whereas the United States accounted for approximately half of global GDP in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, its share had fallen to roughly 24 percent by 2024 [40]. Simultaneously, China has emerged as a peer economic competitor, although its strengths and vulnerabilities differ considerably from those of the United States. This redistribution of economic power has reduced Washington’s capacity to shape global outcomes unilaterally.

Alliance Fragmentation. The Iran crisis has revealed significant strains within NATO, widely regarded as the most successful military alliance in modern history. Several European allies openly refused to support American military operations, while some political leaders characterized the intervention as a unilateral or “private” undertaking rather than a collective security mission [41]. Such divisions indicate that alliance cohesion can no longer be taken for granted.

The Rise of Regional Powers. Iran’s ability to impose substantial costs on the United States and its partners through missile strikes, proxy networks, and leverage over strategic maritime chokepoints illustrates the growing influence of regional powers. As one analyst observed, Iran has evolved from being a “disturbing variable” in regional politics to becoming a “determining pole” capable of shaping broader geopolitical outcomes [42].

Currency Diversification. The crisis has accelerated discussions regarding alternatives to the US dollar-based international financial system. Several analysts have argued that disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have intensified debates surrounding the future of the petrodollar system. Concurrently, China has continued reducing its holdings of US Treasury securities while expanding the use of the yuan in international trade settlements, particularly across Asia,

Africa, and the Middle East [43]. Although the dollar remains dominant, the trend toward currency diversification reflects broader changes in the global balance of power.

The New World Order: Characteristics and Trajectories

The evidence emerging from the Iran crisis suggests that the evolving international order possesses several distinctive characteristics.

No Single Hegemon. Although the United States remains the world's preeminent military power, the crisis demonstrates growing limitations on its ability to compel allies, dictate outcomes, or achieve strategic objectives unilaterally. As several commentators have noted, the conflict has exposed not only American military capabilities but also the limits of American power [44].

No Rigid Bipolarity. Unlike the Cold War era, contemporary geopolitics is not organized around two clearly opposing blocs. China and Russia cooperate selectively but are not formal allies. Europe increasingly pursues strategic autonomy while maintaining its transatlantic partnership. Meanwhile, regional powers such as Iran, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil continue to pursue independent foreign policies based on national interests rather than bloc politics [45].

Multiple Theaters of Competition. Great-power rivalry now unfolds simultaneously across military, economic, technological, cyber, and informational domains. Competition occurs not only in Europe but also across the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and cyberspace. The Iran crisis illustrates this interconnectedness by demonstrating how developments in the Middle East influence calculations regarding Ukraine, energy security, and global supply chains.

The Persistence of Diplomacy. Despite military escalation, all major actors have continued to pursue diplomatic engagement. Pakistan and Oman have facilitated mediation efforts, Russia has offered to broker negotiations, and China has consistently emphasized dialogue and de-escalation. These developments suggest that even amid intensifying strategic competition, major powers remain aware of the catastrophic consequences of confrontation, particularly between nuclear-armed states [46].

Economic Interdependence as a Constraint. The crisis has underscored the enduring significance of economic interdependence. Rising energy prices, disruptions to semiconductor supply chains, and shortages of critical industrial inputs have imposed costs on all actors involved. Consequently, economic vulnerabilities continue to constrain state behavior even within an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment [47].

The “Third World War” Question: Probability and Form

The Iran crisis inevitably raises questions regarding the possibility of a broader global conflict. The available evidence suggests a nuanced conclusion.

Low Probability of Traditional Great-Power War. The conditions that produced the world wars of the twentieth century are largely absent. Nuclear deterrence remains a powerful stabilizing force, while economic interdependence continues to create substantial incentives against direct interstate warfare. Furthermore, public opinion in most democratic societies remains skeptical of large-scale military interventions and prolonged foreign conflicts [48].

High Probability of Continued Hybrid Warfare. While a conventional world war appears unlikely, the crisis highlights the growing prevalence of hybrid forms of conflict. Proxy wars, sanctions, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, blockades, and limited military interventions increasingly characterize great-power competition. Major powers appear willing to compete aggressively but remain reluctant to engage in direct military confrontation with another nuclear-armed state [49].

Systemic Instability as the New Normal. The transition from unipolarity to multipolarity is inherently unstable. No single power possesses the authority or capability to enforce a global order, while no universally accepted rules have emerged to regulate interactions among competing powers. Consequently, the risks of miscalculation, escalation, and regional crises spilling into broader geopolitical confrontations remain significant. The Iran crisis illustrates how a localized conflict can rapidly acquire systemic implications affecting global security, energy markets, and alliance structures [50].

As one analyst observed, “The twenty-first century is the century of global crises.” Increasingly, regional conflicts cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed as components of a deeply interconnected international system.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The Iran crisis challenges several foundational assumptions within international relations theory.

First, it complicates traditional hegemonic transition theory. Rather than witnessing a straightforward confrontation between a declining hegemon and a rising challenger, the current international system is characterized by multiple centers of power with overlapping and often contradictory interests. China and

Russia cooperate selectively but maintain distinct strategic priorities. Europe increasingly pursues independent policies. Consequently, the emerging order appears more fluid and decentralized than either bipolar or classical multipolar models predict [51].

Second, the crisis highlights the limitations of alliance theory. NATO – the most institutionalized and durable alliance in modern history – experienced significant internal divisions not because of external pressure but because member states perceived the conflict differently. Divergent threat perceptions, economic interests, domestic political considerations, and public opinion proved as important as formal treaty obligations in shaping state behavior [52].

Third, the conflict reaffirms the enduring importance of geography and strategic resources. The Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-fifth of global oil supplies pass, demonstrates how a geographically constrained chokepoint can provide substantial leverage to a regional power. Similarly, the importance of helium for semiconductor production and sulfur for fertilizer manufacturing illustrates how critical resources continue to shape geopolitical outcomes in ways often overlooked by abstract theories of power [53].

Policy Implications

For the United States, the crisis suggests that the strategy of “maximum pressure” may have reached the point of diminishing returns. Economic sanctions, military strikes, and coercive diplomacy have not produced Iranian capitulation; instead, they have generated retaliatory actions, regional escalation, and growing reluctance among allies to support American objectives. Under such conditions, a negotiated settlement—even one that falls short of maximalist goals—may represent the most realistic path toward stability.

For Europe, the crisis serves as a strategic wake-up call. Continued dependence on the United States for security, combined with increasingly divergent political and economic interests, creates significant vulnerabilities. Consequently, ongoing discussions regarding defense integration, increased military spending, and strategic autonomy are likely to intensify irrespective of how the conflict ultimately concludes.

For Russia and China, the conflict presents a mixture of opportunities and risks. Russia benefits in the short term from higher energy prices and the diversion of Western attention away from Ukraine. However, prolonged instability could weaken its diplomatic relationships in the Middle East and create opportunities for Ukraine to expand cooperation with Gulf states. China, by contrast, faces substantial economic exposure and therefore possesses strong

incentives to facilitate conflict resolution, even if doing so occasionally creates friction within its partnership with Russia.

Limitations and Future Research

This study remains necessarily preliminary because the conflict is ongoing and many of its long-term consequences have yet to materialize. Several areas warrant further investigation.

First, future research should examine the long-term implications of the crisis for NATO cohesion and the development of European strategic autonomy. Second, scholars should analyze the evolution of Sino-Russian relations in light of their differing interests regarding Iran and broader regional security dynamics [54]. Third, additional research is needed to assess the impact of the conflict on global energy markets, international monetary arrangements, and the future of the petrodollar system. Finally, scholars should explore the potential for conflict diffusion into other strategically significant regions, including the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific.

Such research will be essential for understanding how the Iran crisis contributes to the broader transformation of the international order and the evolving dynamics of twenty-first-century great-power competition [55].

Conclusion

The prospect of a Third World War, in the traditional sense of great-power armies clashing across continental fronts, remains remote. Nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and public opposition to war in democratic societies create powerful barriers to such escalation. However, the Iran crisis reveals that the international system is undergoing a profound transformation. The uni-polar moment – the period of undisputed American primacy following the Cold War – has ended. In its place, a multi-polar system is emerging, characterized by multiple power centers, fluid alliances, and persistent hybrid conflict. The "new world order" of the twenty-first century will not resemble the Cold War's rigid bipolarity or the post-Cold War's uni-polarity. It will be messier, more unpredictable, and more dangerous – not because great powers seek world war, but because the mechanisms that previously managed great-power rivalry (alliances, institutions, shared norms) have weakened.

The Iran crisis is both a symptom and an accelerator of this transformation. The United States can no longer count on automatic allied support. Russia and China, despite their partnership rhetoric, pursue divergent interests. Regional powers like Iran can impose significant costs on superpowers. The global economy is increasingly weaponised. And the Strait of Hormuz – a

narrow waterway in a volatile region – can hold the global economy hostage. We are not on the brink of World War III. But we have left the world of the post-Cold War consensus, and we have not yet arrived at a stable alternative. The transition, as the Iran crisis demonstrates, will be turbulent.

Author Contributions

Joseph O. Odama: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Mukhtar Imam:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Francis C. Okpo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

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