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# **Transatlantic Fracture? The Iran War and the Strategic Future of the US-European Alliance**

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## Abstract

The Iran war has exposed growing tensions within the transatlantic alliance regarding escalation, deterrence, regional stability, and the future of collective security coordination. While the United States (US) increasingly framed confrontation with Iran through the logic of strategic credibility and coercive deterrence, several European governments approached the crisis primarily through the lens of containment, energy security, de-escalation, and the prevention of regional spillover. These diverging strategic priorities generated visible disagreements concerning military participation, maritime security operations, sanctions policy, and the broader management of escalation in the Gulf and the Red Sea.

This study argues that the escalation environment surrounding Iran did not produce a transatlantic rupture in the sense of alliance collapse. Rather, it exposed a deeper transformation in the meaning of alliance cohesion itself. The crisis revealed an emerging pattern of “conditional alliance cohesion” within the transatlantic security relationship: institutional solidarity remains durable, particularly within the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), while participation in out-of-area crises becomes increasingly selective, differentiated, and politically negotiated according to threat perception, economic exposure, and escalation tolerance.

The study develops an analytical framework combining alliance theory, game

theory, and comparative strategic analysis. It conceptualises the Iran war as a coordination dilemma between the US and European allies. Washington sought to maximise deterrence credibility through escalation and military signaling, whereas European governments prioritised risk reduction and regional stabilisation because of their greater exposure to energy disruption, refugee flows, maritime insecurity, and economic volatility.

This article further argues that wartime stability, strategic diversification, and peace-facilitating regional actors have become central to understanding how alliances and exposed states manage prolonged escalation without allowing regional conflict to generate systemic breakdown.

The study concludes that the future of the transatlantic alliance will depend less on ideological solidarity than on the ability of Western actors to manage divergent threat perceptions without undermining institutional cohesion. In an era characterised by fragmented security environments and competing regional crises, alliance resilience increasingly depends upon flexible coordination mechanisms capable of accommodating strategic asymmetry among allies.

### Keywords:

transatlantic alliance, NATO, Iran war, strategic divergence, wartime stability, strategic diversification, peace proxies, regional mediation, crisis resilience

## Introduction

The transatlantic alliance is confronting a strategic environment far more fragmented and politically complex than the one that shaped NATO during either the Cold War or the immediate post-Cold War era. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine generated a renewed sense of Western unity, the escalation surrounding Iran exposed a different dimension of alliance politics: the growing divergence between the US and several European governments regarding the management of crises outside Europe's territorial core. The disagreement was not simply about tactics or operational preferences. It reflected increasingly different assumptions about deterrence, escalation, regional stability, and the acceptable costs of geopolitical confrontation.

Washington increasingly interpreted regional escalation through the logic of deterrence credibility and the preservation of American strategic commitments across multiple theatres. Several European governments approached the same crisis from a different position, shaped by greater exposure to energy volatility, maritime disruption, migration pressures, and economic spillover. The resulting divergence concerned more than operational preference: it reflected different assessments of the costs of escalation and of the means through which regional stability could best be preserved.

These tensions revived long-standing debates concerning burden-sharing, strategic autonomy, and the future of transatlantic coordination. Yet the current crisis differs in important ways from earlier disagreements surrounding Iraq or Libya. The escalation environment surrounding Iran unfolded at a moment when the international system was already under significant strain. The war in Ukraine, disruptions

in the Red Sea, intensifying US-China rivalry, energy insecurity, and fragmentation within the global economy collectively produced a far more unstable strategic setting than the one that shaped earlier alliance disputes. As a result, disagreements inside NATO increasingly reflected not only different policy preferences, but also different interpretations of which threats deserved prioritisation in the first place.

This study argues that the Iran war did not produce a transatlantic rupture in the conventional sense of institutional breakdown. NATO remained institutionally cohesive and central to European territorial security, while the wider transatlantic response to the Iran crisis became operationally differentiated. What the conflict revealed instead was a gradual transformation in the character of alliance cohesion itself. While institutional solidarity continues to exist, operational participation has become more selective, differentiated, and politically negotiated. Alliance members increasingly support common objectives while simultaneously diverging over the scope, intensity, and strategic meaning of military involvement.

More specifically, the article treats conditional alliance cohesion as the central analytical concept, while wartime stability, strategic diversification, and regional peace-facilitating actors are examined as mechanisms through which differentiated participation can be managed during prolonged escalation.

The article conceptualises this pattern as conditional alliance cohesion. Under such conditions, cohesion remains relatively strong when threats are direct, territorially concentrated, and collectively experienced, as demonstrated during the Ukraine war. By contrast, coordination becomes more fragmented when crises involve uneven exposure to risk, complex regional escalation

dynamics, and competing interpretations of deterrence and stability. The Iran war illustrates this emerging pattern with unusual clarity because it sits at the intersection of regional conflict, maritime insecurity, energy vulnerability, great-power competition, and alliance politics simultaneously.

For the purposes of this study, the term “Iran war” does not refer to a formally declared interstate war between the US and Iran. Instead, it refers to a broader and sustained escalation environment involving proxy conflict, coercive deterrence, maritime disruption, sanctions pressure, limited military strikes, and regional confrontation extending across the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Red Sea. The analytical focus therefore concerns the cumulative strategic consequences of prolonged escalation rather than a single temporally bounded military campaign.

The term is therefore used here as an analytical shorthand for an Iran-centred regional escalation complex, rather than as a legal description of a formally declared interstate war. In addition, the analytical focus centres on the period between October 2023 and mid-2024, encompassing the post-7 October regional escalation, the intensification of Houthi maritime attacks, the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian in December 2023, and the subsequent establishment of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES in February 2024. This period is treated as a coherent strategic episode rather than a sequence of disconnected events, because it is during this interval that transatlantic divergence became operationally visible and institutionally consequential.

The article also uses the Iran crisis to examine how stability is produced during war rather than only after war. Prolonged escalation rarely suspends all forms of regional order. Even under conditions of proxy conflict, maritime disruption, sanc-

tions pressure, and military signalling, certain corridors, institutions, diplomatic channels, and regional actors continue to preserve limited forms of communication, trade, mediation, and crisis management. This article refers to these spaces as war-time stability mechanisms. Their importance lies in the fact that they allow exposed states and alliances to reduce systemic disruption while transforming short-term vulnerability into longer-term political, economic, and diplomatic leverage.

This article treats the Iran crisis less as an exceptional episode than as a revealing stress test for the contemporary alliance. Its importance lies in what it makes visible: not the disappearance of transatlantic solidarity, but the growing difficulty of translating solidarity into common operational behaviour.

## **Theoretical framework: alliance cohesion, threat perception, and conditional strategic alignment**

The Iran war is analytically significant not simply because it involved regional escalation in the Middle East, but because it exposed deeper tensions inside the transatlantic alliance concerning the management of contemporary insecurity. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has relied heavily on the assumption that institutional consultation, shared political identity, and American strategic leadership would be sufficient to preserve alliance cohesion even during periods of disagreement. The crisis surrounding Iran suggests that this assumption is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain under conditions of fragmented threat perception and uneven strategic exposure.

One could argue that NATO has always tolerated disagreement and that the Iran crisis adds little to earlier disputes over Iraq or Libya. This reading is partly persuasive. Yet it misses the cumulative character of the present moment, where military disagreement overlaps with energy insecurity, maritime disruption, domestic polarisation, and competing regional priorities.

Traditional alliance theory generally assumes that external threats encourage internal cohesion. Yet alliances rarely function through perfectly unified strategic calculations. Member states often experience different levels of vulnerability, possess different domestic constraints, and interpret risks through distinct geopolitical perspectives. These differences become especially visible in crises unfolding outside the alliance's core territorial space, where the costs and consequences of escalation are distributed unevenly.

The US escalation management was closely connected to broader concerns regarding American resolve, alliance reassurance, and the signalling of geopolitical commitment across multiple theatres simultaneously. From Washington's perspective, insufficient response risked encouraging further regional destabilisation and weakening the credibility of deterrence more broadly.

Several European governments' primary concerns centred less on demonstrating coercive credibility and more on containing instability before it generated wider economic and political consequences. Maritime disruption, energy insecurity, inflationary pressure, migration flows, and regional spillover occupied a more central position in European calculations. As a result, many European governments approached escalation with greater caution and stronger preference for diplomatic containment and defensive stabilisation

measures (European External Action Service, 2022).

This divergence reflects what may be described as an asymmetric exposure dilemma within alliance politics. States rarely confront identical costs from the same geopolitical crisis. The leading power may prioritise strategic credibility and escalation dominance, while geographically or economically exposed allies prioritise containment and risk reduction.

Game theory provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. The crisis resembled a coordination problem in which alliance members shared an interest in preserving institutional solidarity but disagreed regarding acceptable escalation thresholds. European governments feared entrapment in an expanding regional conflict whose economic and political costs would disproportionately affect Europe. The US, meanwhile, worried that insufficient allied support might weaken its reputation for resolve and encourage adversarial escalation elsewhere.

Under such conditions, selective cooperation emerged as a politically sustainable compromise. European governments participated through maritime protection, intelligence coordination, logistical support, and diplomatic engagement while limiting involvement in offensive military escalation. This arrangement allowed NATO to preserve institutional cohesion without requiring full strategic convergence.

This pattern of preserved cohesion under selective participation resonates with a broader literature on alliance adaptation and coalition reconfiguration. Ringsmose and Rynning (2021) have argued that NATO's post-2010 strategic concepts increasingly required the alliance to prioritise among competing missions rather than pursue all of them uniformly, a logic of se-

lective emphasis that anticipates the differentiated participation examined here. Deni and Webber (2026) similarly note that even NATO's command structure has had to accommodate uneven American engagement without triggering institutional breakdown. Rynning's (2022) account of NATO's difficulty in formulating a unified China policy - oscillating between alliance-wide alignment and case-by-case abdication - offers a parallel instance of conditional cohesion outside the Euro-Atlantic core, suggesting that the pattern identified in this article reflects a more general feature of contemporary NATO politics rather than a peculiarity of the Iran crisis.

This reading is consistent with Flockhart's (2019) observation that NATO has long combined internal fracture with continued institutional functioning, and with Jones's (2026) more recent argument that European security is entering a "post-Atlantic" phase in which European actors increasingly hedge against uneven American commitment rather than assume its permanence. Szenes's (2023) assessment of the 2022 Strategic Concept similarly notes that the document accommodates a wide range of national postures under a shared deterrence rhetoric, institutionalising much of the variable geometry described in this article rather than resolving it.

A related mechanism is "wartime stability": the preservation of limited geographic, diplomatic, and institutional spaces in which trade, communication, or mediation continues despite a wider environment of conflict. States that sustain such functions can acquire strategic relevance by reducing the costs of escalation for other actors. In the Iran crisis, this role became particularly visible among regional states that maintained diplomatic channels, logistical connectivity, or mediation capacity while avoiding direct military alignment.

In practice, differentiated cooperation may represent an adaptive response to increasingly fragmented geopolitical conditions. Modern alliances operate in an international environment characterised by overlapping crises, uneven vulnerability, and competing strategic priorities. Strategic diversification provides a second mechanism of adjustment. By widening security partnerships, logistical routes, energy sources, and diplomatic channels, states reduce the costs of dependence on any single actor or framework. Within the argument developed here, diversification matters because it increases the political space available for differentiated participation without requiring withdrawal from the underlying alliance.

Repeated reliance on differentiated participation may gradually reshape the political meaning of alliance solidarity itself. Cohesion remains strongest when threats are direct, territorial, and collectively perceived. It becomes more conditional when crises involve regional complexity, economic interdependence, and contested escalation logic.

The central challenge facing NATO is no longer simply maintaining military interoperability or distributing material burdens more equally. The deeper challenge concerns whether institutional trust can survive despite increasingly divergent understandings of risk, deterrence, and geopolitical order among alliance members.

In this study, conditional alliance cohesion refers to a situation in which formal institutional solidarity persists while member states vary their operational participation according to threat perception, domestic constraints, and exposure to escalation costs.

This concept should be distinguished from adjacent terms already established in the alliance-politics literature, with which it is

sometimes conflated. Differentiated cooperation refers broadly to arrangements in which states participate unevenly in common institutional or policy frameworks. In the European security context, it often describes variable levels of participation across European Union (EU) and transatlantic defence initiatives, a structural feature of the institutions themselves rather than of wartime operational behaviour. Burden-sharing concerns the distribution of financial and material costs among allies, a debate substantially organised around defence-spending targets rather than around the selective participation documented in this article. Strategic autonomy refers to the aspiration for independent European decision-making capacity, a goal that remains institutionally incomplete, as the discussion of ASPIDES below demonstrates. Coalition politics describes the formation and management of ad hoc groupings around a specific operation, without implying anything about the cohesion of the parent alliance once that operation ends. Conditional alliance cohesion differs from all four: it describes a condition of the alliance as such, in which formal solidarity is preserved precisely because operational participation is permitted to vary, rather than a financial arrangement, an aspiration, or an ad hoc grouping (Howorth, 2018).

This study extends this framework by linking conditional alliance cohesion to wartime stability. In fragmented escalation environments, alliance cohesion is shaped not only by common threat perception, but also by the ability of allies and regional partners to preserve functional spaces of stability while conflict continues. Wartime stability refers to the limited but strategically significant capacity to keep trade routes open, maintain diplomatic channels, protect energy and logistical flows, and support mediation during periods of regional confrontation. It is not the opposite of war. It is the organ-

ised preservation of selected flows, channels, and institutions inside a wider environment of conflict.

Strategic diversification represents one of the main mechanisms through which wartime stability is sustained. States reduce exposure to escalation by diversifying security partnerships, maritime arrangements, energy suppliers, logistical corridors, and diplomatic channels. This does not necessarily mean abandoning existing alliances. It means managing dependence by building a wider strategic portfolio. In this sense, diversification becomes a form of resilience: it allows states to absorb disruption, avoid forced alignment, and preserve room for diplomatic and economic manoeuvre.

A second mechanism concerns the role of peace proxies. Whereas war proxies expand conflict by transmitting violence across regional arenas, peace proxies help contain escalation by preserving mediation channels, hosting indirect talks, facilitating humanitarian or diplomatic communication, and keeping limited forms of regional order functioning. Jordan, Oman, and Egypt illustrate this logic in different ways. Their relevance does not derive primarily from military power, but from their ability to operate as diplomatic, logistical, and political stabilisers during moments of regional escalation.

Conditional alliance cohesion therefore sits at the intersection of alliance adaptation and coalition reconfiguration. The concept addresses a specific problem that becomes more visible in a fragmented international order: how a formal alliance preserves institutional coherence when its members participate unevenly in crises that fall outside the alliance's core territorial commitments. Alliance adaptation explains how institutions adjust to changing threats; coalition politics explains how states assemble operational groupings for particular

missions. Conditional alliance cohesion focuses instead on the relationship between these two levels. It asks how repeated reliance on selective coalitions, national contributions, and parallel institutional frameworks affects the cohesion of the underlying alliance over time. The concept is therefore most relevant where formal alliance membership remains stable but operational alignment becomes contingent on the type of crisis, the distribution of risk, and the political costs of participation.

## The Iran war as a transatlantic coordination dilemma

Although regional escalation involving Iran predates October 2023 by several years, it was the convergence of the Gaza war, Houthi maritime operations, and competing Western responses that transformed a chronic tension into an acute coordination dilemma for the transatlantic alliance. Operational divergence became visible between December 2023 and February 2024, especially through the separation between US-led and EU-led maritime responses in the Red Sea (Clark, 2024; Reuters, 2024a). On 18 December 2023, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian as a multinational initiative under the Combined Maritime Forces and Task Force 153, explicitly linking the Red Sea crisis to freedom of navigation and collective maritime security. The timing matters analytically: Washington moved first through a US-led naval framework, while several European governments waited for a separate EU mandate before committing their naval assets (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023)

European operational differentiation became clearer on 19 February 2024, when

the Council of the EU launched EUNAVFOR ASPIDES. Unlike the US-led framework, the EU described ASPIDES as a defensive maritime security operation intended to restore and safeguard freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf. The Council had already approved a crisis-management concept on 29 January and formally established the operation on 8 February, giving the mission a narrower institutional and legal profile than the American-led deterrence framework (Council of the European Union, 2024).

For the US, the confrontation with Iran was closely linked to broader concerns regarding coercive signalling and the preservation of strategic order. Washington did not treat the crisis as a purely regional confrontation. American policy-makers increasingly linked escalation in the Gulf and the Red Sea to broader questions of strategic credibility across multiple theatres (Schelling, 1966). European governments interpreted the crisis differently, which became particularly visible in debates surrounding maritime security operations in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. Attacks on commercial shipping and growing militarisation of maritime routes generated substantial economic consequences, especially for Europe's trade-dependent economies. Increased insurance premiums, rerouted shipping lanes, and delays in commercial transit quickly affected supply chains and transportation costs across global markets (Kamali et al., 2024). European policy-makers increasingly feared that further military escalation could deepen instability rather than restore deterrence (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024a).

European governments pursued a more differentiated approach. Rather than fully integrating into the American operational framework, the EU launched Operation

Aspides in February 2024 under a narrower defensive mandate centred on vessel protection, maritime escort operations, and de-escalatory stabilisation. The distinction was strategically significant. While the US framed maritime operations through the logic of coercive deterrence, several European governments framed participation through the language of defensive stabilisation and legal proportionality (Reuters, 2024b).

This divergence became even more visible following the US-British strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen in January 2024. Britain participated directly in the strikes alongside Washington, reinforcing its traditional Atlantic alignment. France, Italy, and Spain avoided participation and emphasised de-escalation and defensive maritime protection instead. Germany contributed naval assets to maritime security operations but maintained restrictive parliamentary mandates designed to prevent escalation into broader offensive engagement (Die Welt, 2024). The German deployment of the frigate *Hessen* under EU command reflected a carefully calibrated participation model: active maritime protection combined with institutional and political constraints on offensive escalation (Bundeswehr, 2024).

These developments demonstrate that the transatlantic divergence surrounding Iran was not rhetorical alone. It produced observable operational differentiation regarding military participation, escalation thresholds, institutional coordination, and the political framing of maritime security itself.

The Iraq war remains particularly important as a historical comparison because it exposed earlier fractures regarding Middle Eastern interventionism. However, the Iran war differs from the Iraq war in

several important respects. First, the current crisis unfolded within a far more fragmented international order characterised by simultaneous great-power competition and institutional weakening. Second, Europe today faces greater economic vulnerability because of post-pandemic supply chain fragility, energy market instability after the Ukraine war, and increased domestic political polarisation. Third, the rise of strategic autonomy debates inside the EU has strengthened political pressure for more independent European security decision-making.

The concept of “European strategic autonomy” became increasingly relevant throughout the crisis. French President Emmanuel Macron repeatedly argued that Europe must avoid becoming strategically dependent upon either Washington or Beijing and should instead develop greater independent decision-making capacity (Anderlini & Caulcutt, 2023). Although strategic autonomy remains institutionally incomplete, the Iran war demonstrated that European governments increasingly seek differentiated responses to crises rather than automatic alignment with American escalation strategies.

This development does not imply the collapse of the transatlantic alliance. On the contrary, NATO remains structurally indispensable for European territorial security, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The problem is more subtle. NATO cohesion increasingly depends upon the type of crisis involved. When the threat concerns direct territorial defence in Europe, alliance cohesion remains high because threat perception is relatively unified. When the crisis involves complex regional escalation outside Europe, alliance coordination becomes conditional, selective, and politically negotiated.

This distinction reveals the emergence of what may be described as “functional differentiation” within NATO. Alliance members no longer participate equally across all security domains. Instead, participation varies according to geography, political exposure, domestic constraints, and strategic interpretation. Some allies contribute militarily, others diplomatically, others logistically, and some primarily symbolically. The alliance survives institutionally while becoming operationally differentiated.

This equilibrium, however, carries important long-term implications. Repeated reliance on selective cooperation may gradually normalise strategic fragmentation inside NATO. The alliance increasingly risks evolving into a dual structure characterised by strong cohesion regarding territorial defence in Europe, but weaker and more differentiated coordination in crises unfolding beyond the Euro-Atlantic core.

The January 2024 US-British strikes against Houthi targets exposed the operational split more sharply. Britain joined Washington directly, while Italy, Spain, and France did not participate and did not sign the ten-country statement justifying the strikes. Reuters reported that France explained its position partly through concern over avoiding wider regional escalation, while Italy and Spain also distanced themselves from the US-British military track. This was not a rejection of maritime security as such; it was a refusal to merge European participation automatically with offensive escalation (Reuters, 2024b, 2024c).

The Iran war revealed this transformation with unusual clarity because the crisis combined military confrontation, maritime insecurity, economic interdependence, and geopolitical competition simulta-

neously. The disagreement was therefore not limited to operational details. It reflected broader differences regarding the meaning of deterrence, the management of escalation, and the acceptable balance between coercion and stability in an increasingly fragmented international order.

Beyond the debate over deterrence and escalation, the Iran war revealed the growing importance of wartime stability zones. These are not spaces detached from conflict, but functional areas in which limited order is preserved while confrontation continues around them. Maritime corridors, defensive naval missions, diplomatic backchannels, energy routes, and mediation platforms can all operate as mechanisms of wartime stability. Their function is not to end the conflict immediately, but to prevent escalation from destroying the connective infrastructure through which trade, communication, mediation, and crisis management remain possible.

This distinction matters analytically because the Iran war showed that stability during war is not produced only through military deterrence. It is also produced through the protection of flows, the management of exposure, and the preservation of channels among actors that continue to disagree strategically. Operation Aspides, for example, can be read not only as a defensive maritime mission, but also as a European attempt to create a limited stability mechanism inside a wider escalation environment. The strategic value of such mechanisms lies in their ability to convert vulnerability into leverage. States and institutions capable of preserving stability functions during conflict often accumulate political credibility, economic relevance, and diplomatic influence that extend beyond the immediate crisis.

**Table 1.** Micro-Level Indicators of Operational Differentiation

| <b>Date</b>     | <b>Actor</b>         | <b>Evidence</b>                                              | <b>Analytical Meaning</b>                       |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 18 Dec. 2023    | US                   | Operation Prosperity Guardian announced                      | US-led maritime deterrence framework            |
| 11-12 Jan. 2024 | US / UK              | Joint strikes against Houthi targets                         | Higher escalation tolerance                     |
| 12 Jan. 2024    | France, Italy, Spain | No participation in strikes; no signature on joint statement | European reluctance toward offensive escalation |
| 29 Jan. 2024    | EU Council           | Crisis-management concept approved                           | Preparation of separate EU track                |
| 08 Feb. 2024    | EU Council           | ASPIDES formally established                                 | Institutional separation from US-led framework  |
| 19 Feb. 2024    | EU                   | ASPIDES launched                                             | Defensive maritime mandate                      |
| 23 Feb. 2024    | Germany              | Bundestag approves Hessen deployment                         | Parliamentary and EU-bounded                    |

Source: Elaborated by author. Sourced from Council of the European Union, 2024; Die Welt, 2024; Reuters, 2024b; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023.

The table also shows that timing mattered. Washington acted first, Britain followed militarily, while the EU translated concern into a separate legal and institutional framework. The sequence itself reveals hierarchy, hesitation, and institutional differentiation.

This evidence should be read at three distinct levels, since it does not all bear equally on NATO cohesion specifically. The clearest direct evidence of disagreement among NATO members is the January 2024 split over participation in strikes against Houthi targets: Britain joined Washington, while France, Italy, and Spain - all NATO members - declined and did not sign the joint statement. The comparison between the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU's ASPIDES mission, by contrast, constitutes only indirect evidence

of intra-NATO tension: ASPIDES is a EU operation rather than a NATO framework, and non-EU allies including the US and Britain stood outside it entirely, so the comparison illustrates US-EU institutional divergence more directly than it illustrates fracture within NATO as such. A third and broader layer of structural evidence concerns the longer-run evolution of Western security cooperation - including the growth of EU defence instruments such as the Strategic Compass and PESCO, discussed later in this article -, which speaks less to this specific crisis than to the trajectory within which it occurred. Distinguishing these three levels avoids overstating what the ASPIDES-Prosperity

Guardian comparison alone can establish about NATO's internal cohesion, while

allowing each category of evidence to support a more precisely bounded claim.

## **Divergent escalation logics: deterrence, stability, and the politics of risk**

One of the most revealing aspects of the Iran war was the emergence of competing escalation logics within the transatlantic alliance. Although the US and Europe formally supported the protection of maritime security and regional stability, they differed significantly regarding how those objectives should be achieved and how risk should be managed politically. The disagreement extended beyond operational preferences and reflected deeper differences in strategic culture and threat interpretation.

The operational divergence reflected different understandings of escalation risk. Washington treated visible military resolve as a means of restoring deterrence and protecting the credibility of American commitments (Brands & Beckley, 2022). Several European governments approached the same escalation with greater concern for its potential economic and political spillover, particularly through energy volatility, maritime disruption, and regional instability. The disagreement therefore concerned the pathway to stability rather than the objective itself: American policy placed greater weight on coercive reassurance, while European responses placed greater weight on containment and defensive stabilisation (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

These competing logics also reflected contrasting geopolitical perspectives. American strategy increasingly connected regional crises to wider systemic competition involving Russia, China, Iran, and other revision-

ist actors. From Washington's viewpoint, credibility in one theatre influenced credibility elsewhere. European governments tended to approach crises more regionally and pragmatically, focusing on immediate economic and political consequences rather than integrating every confrontation into a single global strategic framework.

The Iran war consequently demonstrated how alliance members can share broad strategic objectives while diverging substantially regarding operational priorities and escalation thresholds. Such divergence does not automatically produce institutional collapse, but it complicates coordination and gradually reshapes the nature of alliance politics itself.

Yet this model of coordination introduces longer-term uncertainty regarding the future character of NATO. Alliances traditionally depend not only on military interoperability, but also on shared assumptions regarding risk, solidarity, and strategic purpose. Repeated crises characterised by differentiated participation may gradually weaken those shared assumptions, even if institutional cooperation continues operationally. The disagreement was therefore not between stability and instability, but between two rival theories of how stability is produced.

## **NATO, selective cooperation, and the institutional management of strategic divergence**

NATO remained institutionally relevant during the Iran crisis without assuming operational ownership of the Red Sea response, while individual allies and parallel coalitions adopted markedly different positions (Aras, 2019).

This distinction requires clarification at the outset, since much of the apparent disagreement documented below concerns political coordination rather than any NATO legal commitment. NATO's binding obligations derive from the Washington Treaty, whose Article 5 applies only within the treaty's defined North Atlantic area; maritime deployments to the Red Sea and the Gulf fall outside that area and outside any binding treaty obligation, and remain a matter of political choice among members rather than a matter of alliance law. Discussions of the crisis often treat NATO and the broader Western security coalition as interchangeable, although they refer to different levels of institutional and political coordination. What varied during the Iran crisis was political coordination among NATO members and partners acting outside the treaty's Article 5 remit – not com-

pliance with any NATO legal obligation, since none applied to out-of-area operations of this kind. Keeping this distinction in view matters for how the empirical record below should be read: a member's non-participation in Red Sea operations reflects a discretionary political decision, not a breach of alliance commitment.

Throughout the crisis, NATO largely avoided presenting itself as a unified offensive actor in the Middle East. Official alliance discourse emphasised regional stability, maritime security, and freedom of navigation without fully institutionalising a single escalation strategy. This ambiguity was politically necessary. A stronger formal alignment behind coercive escalation risked intensifying internal divisions among member states already operating under different strategic calculations.

Cooperation occurred through maritime patrols, intelligence sharing, missile defence coordination, logistical assistance, sanctions implementation, and diplomatic

consultation rather than through a single unified operational structure. Transatlantic security coordination remained active, but operational participation was distributed across national contributions, US-led coalitions, and the separate EU framework.

The institutional language used by NATO remained cautious. Rather than converting the Red Sea crisis into a formal NATO operation, allied coordination proceeded through overlapping coalitions, national contributions, US-led naval arrangements, and the separate EU framework. This mattered because NATO solidarity was preserved politically while operational responsibility was distributed across different institutional channels (Council of the European Union, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

The crisis demonstrated that contemporary alliance management depends increasingly on flexibility rather than uniformity. Different member states participated according to their own strategic exposure, domestic political constraints, and interpretations of escalation risk. Britain aligned closely with Washington and maintained a relatively high tolerance for coercive deterrence measures. France attempted to balance alliance coordination with diplomatic autonomy and regional stabilisation. Germany remained more restrained and institutionally cautious, particularly regarding offensive military involvement. Southern European governments worried heavily about migration pressures, energy instability, and Mediterranean spillover effects, while Eastern European states remained primarily concerned with preserving strong American commitment against Russia (Major & Kleemann, 2025).

In practice, differentiated involvement helped governments reconcile alliance solidarity with domestic constraints. In many cases, differentiated involvement reflects

efforts by governments to reconcile competing strategic pressures simultaneously. European governments sought to preserve transatlantic solidarity while also limiting exposure to escalation dynamics capable of producing severe domestic and economic consequences.

During the Cold War, NATO cohesion was reinforced by a relatively clear and territorially concentrated external threat. Contemporary crises are far more fragmented and interconnected. Maritime insecurity, cyber threats, supply-chain disruption, energy vulnerability, and regional escalation often affect member states unevenly.

The Iran crisis demonstrated these limits particularly clearly in relation to out-of-area operations. NATO's post-Cold War evolution expanded its political agenda beyond territorial defence, yet consensus remains more difficult when crises fall outside the alliance's treaty area and involve uneven exposure to escalation costs (Rynning, 2024).

## **Maritime security, energy vulnerability, and the political economy of alliance behaviour**

One of the most important dimensions of the Iran war was the extent to which maritime insecurity became inseparable from alliance politics and economic stability. The crisis demonstrated that contemporary geopolitical confrontation no longer unfolds solely through conventional military operations. Increasingly, conflicts affect global order through disruption of connectivity systems such as shipping routes, energy corridors, supply chains, insurance markets, and logistical infrastructure. As a result, alliance behaviour during the crisis cannot

be understood purely through traditional military analysis. It must also be examined through the political economy of vulnerability and interdependence.

The Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz acquired exceptional strategic significance because they function simultaneously as military chokepoints and commercial arteries of the global economy. The regional states flanking these corridors - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Oman - did not respond to the crisis as passive geographic features but as strategic actors with their own calculations regarding escalation, alignment, and economic survival. As Gause has argued, Gulf state foreign policy is shaped less by abstract national interest than by regime security calculations and the management of domestic vulnerabilities in the context of great-power competition (Gause, 2010). Threats against maritime navigation quickly produced consequences extending far beyond the Middle East itself. Shipping rerouting, increased transit times, higher insurance costs, and disruptions to energy flows affected inflation, industrial production, and commercial stability across multiple regions, particularly in Europe (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2024).

The EU's mandate language also reveals the economic logic behind European caution. Josep Borrell presented *ASPIDES* as a response to threats against a "highly strategic maritime corridor" and linked the operation to safeguarding commercial and security interests. This wording is important because it framed the Red Sea less as a theatre for coercive escalation and more as an economic-security corridor requiring protection without widening the conflict (Council of the European Union, 2024).

The crisis revealed how deeply contemporary security politics are intertwined with

economic connectivity. During much of the Cold War, alliance strategy focused primarily on defending territory against direct military attack. The Iran war highlighted a different reality: modern geopolitical competition increasingly targets flows rather than borders alone. Maritime routes, supply chains, energy infrastructure, ports, and logistical networks now occupy a central position within strategic calculations because disruption of these systems can generate severe political and economic consequences without requiring large-scale territorial warfare.

These vulnerabilities also increased incentives for European governments to diversify energy suppliers, maritime arrangements, and logistical routes, a dynamic examined in the following section. This transformation intensified asymmetries inside the transatlantic alliance. European economies remain heavily dependent upon maritime commerce, imported energy, and integrated trade networks extending through the Middle East and Indo-Pacific. Instability in the Gulf or the Red Sea therefore carried immediate economic implications for Europe through rising transportation costs, energy volatility, inflationary pressure, and industrial disruption (Cowen, 2014).

The US faced lower direct exposure to Red Sea disruption because of geographic distance, domestic energy capacity, and lower dependence on the Suez-Red Sea corridor. European behaviour during the crisis reflected this vulnerability clearly. Governments strongly supported protecting maritime navigation and commercial stability, yet many remained reluctant to endorse open-ended military escalation. Maritime security therefore became politically paradoxical. Europe required military stabilisation measures to protect trade routes, but feared that aggressive escalation could intensify instability and deepen

economic disruption further (European Commission, 2024a).

The US approached maritime security through a more strategic and geopolitical framework. American policy-makers interpreted attacks on shipping routes as challenges to international order and freedom of navigation. Protecting maritime flows therefore became linked not only to economic stability, but also to preserving the credibility of American global leadership and naval primacy (Mahan, 1890).

The economic dimension of the crisis reinforced these differences repeatedly. Rising shipping costs and disruptions to maritime trade affected European economies disproportionately because of their dependence on commercial imports and industrial manufacturing networks. Energy market volatility created additional political pressure inside Europe at a time when many governments were already managing fragile post-pandemic economic recovery and the long-term effects of the Ukraine war.

The Iran war therefore demonstrated that contemporary alliance behaviour cannot be explained solely through military capability or institutional commitments. Economic exposure increasingly shapes strategic preferences as strongly as traditional security concerns. States respond to crises not only according to alliance obligations, but also according to vulnerability within interconnected systems of trade, finance, energy, and logistics (UNCTAD, 2024b).

This reality complicates alliance cohesion considerably because economic vulnerabilities are distributed unevenly among member states. The more interconnected the global economy becomes, the more difficult it becomes for alliances to maintain identical threat perceptions and escalation preferences across different regions and crises.

The broader implication is that 21st-century alliance politics increasingly operates within what may be described as a security environment of uneven interdependence. NATO members remain institutionally linked, yet they experience the costs of instability differently according to geography, economic structure, and political exposure. The Iran war revealed this condition with unusual clarity. Maritime insecurity generated direct political and economic consequences inside Europe even without large-scale military confrontation on European territory itself.

By early 2024, attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea had already forced major shipping companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope instead of using the Suez Canal route. This diversion significantly increased transit times between Asia and Europe, raised fuel consumption, and pushed shipping and insurance costs upward across multiple sectors. European economies were particularly vulnerable because of their dependence on maritime trade, industrial imports, and energy flows passing through the Red Sea corridor (UNCTAD, 2024b). Delays in commercial deliveries affected manufacturing schedules and supply chains in several European states, especially Germany and Italy, while higher transportation and energy costs reinforced inflationary pressures already intensified by the economic consequences of the Ukraine war. The US faced fewer immediate economic consequences because of its greater geographical distance from the disruption zone, stronger domestic energy capacity, and comparatively lower dependence on the Red Sea-Suez trade corridor (EIA, 2024; Kamali et al., 2024).

For Germany in particular, industrial production remained highly sensitive to shipping delays and energy volatility because of the export-oriented structure of its manu-

facturing sector. Italian policy-makers similarly expressed concern regarding rising transportation costs and Mediterranean trade disruption during the first months of 2024 (European Commission, 2024b).

## Strategic diversification as wartime resilience

Strategic diversification should be understood as one of the principal mechanisms through which states manage uncertainty during prolonged escalation. The Iran war demonstrated that exposed actors no longer rely on a single layer of protection. Instead, they construct wider strategic portfolios composed of security partnerships, maritime arrangements, energy suppliers, trade corridors, financial instruments, and diplomatic channels. This form of diversification does not replace alliances. It makes alliance participation more flexible by reducing the political and economic costs of dependence on one actor, one route, or one escalation strategy.

This logic operated across several levels during the Iran crisis. At the security level, European governments avoided full absorption into the American deterrence framework by supporting a separate EU-led defensive maritime mission. At the economic level, energy-importing states faced stronger incentives to diversify suppliers, routes, and storage capacities because maritime disruption exposed the fragility of concentrated supply chains. At the diplomatic level, states and institutions relied on multiple channels of communication to prevent escalation from becoming diplomatically unmanageable. Strategic diversification therefore became a practical response to asymmetric exposure: the more unevenly allies experienced the costs of escalation, the more they sought differentiated tools of risk management.

In this sense, resilience involves more than absorbing disruption. Diversification allows states to adjust the channels through which security, trade, energy, and diplomacy are maintained during crisis. Its relevance to alliance cohesion lies in the additional room for manoeuvre it creates: states can remain within shared institutions while reducing the costs associated with dependence on a single route, supplier, or operational framework.

## **Strategic autonomy, alliance dependency, and the future of European security identity**

The Iran war did not invent the debate over European strategic autonomy. It inherited it, and exposed, with unusual operational clarity, the distance between what that debate had produced institutionally and what the crisis actually demanded.

For over a decade, European governments had argued, with increasing conviction, that the continent required greater capacity to act independently in security matters. The Strategic Compass of 2022 codified much of this ambition. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), established in 2017, was meant to be the structural vehicle through which European defence cooperation moved from aspiration to capability. By 2023, PESCO had generated 68 collaborative projects spanning armoured vehicles, cyber defence, maritime surveillance, and logistics. What it had not generated was a deployable force with autonomous command structure, common logistics, or unified rules of engagement capable of responding to a rapidly evolving maritime crisis without relying heavily on American as-

sets (Council of the European Union, 2023).

This matters because ASPIDES - the EU's maritime operation launched in February 2024 - is frequently cited as evidence that European strategic autonomy is operationally real. The claim deserves scrutiny. ASPIDES was a genuine institutional achievement in that it provided the EU with a distinct legal framework, a separate command structure, and a defensive mandate that European governments could support without formally aligning with the US-British strike campaign. At the same time, the operation did not remove the broader European dependence on NATO and US military capabilities, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and supporting security infrastructure. ASPIDES therefore demonstrated something more nuanced than autonomy: European governments had acquired greater institutional capacity to differentiate their political and operational response from Washington while remaining embedded in a wider transatlantic security architecture (Allard et al., 2024; Council of the European Union, 2024; TOCCI, 2019).

The funding dimension reinforces this reading. European defence spending increased significantly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the investment remained heavily concentrated in territorial defence capabilities oriented toward the Eastern flank - tanks, air defence systems, ammunition stockpiles - rather than the power projection, long-range maritime patrol, and expeditionary logistics that out-of-area crises require. The European Defence Fund, launched in 2021 with a budget of nearly eight billion euros for 2021-2027, supports both collaborative defence research and capability development projects. Yet this investment does not by itself resolve the expeditionary, long-range maritime, and operational sustainment gaps exposed by out-of-area crises such as ASPIDES (Euro-

pean Commission, n.d.). The structural consequence is that European governments can choose where to participate and under what institutional label, but they cannot yet choose the full scope of what they do independently once they get there. That asymmetry - between institutional choice and operational capacity - is the most precise definition of what autonomy under dependency means in practice.

Germany illustrates this condition particularly clearly. The political journey that led Berlin to deploy the Hessen was not straightforward. The Bundestag mandate was carefully bounded: defensive protection only, no offensive strike authorisation, EU command structure exclusively. This was not timidity for its own sake. It reflected a genuine institutional logic in which parliamentary oversight functions as a constraint on escalation, and in which the EU label provides domestic legitimacy that a US-led coalition would not. What it also reflected, however, was that Germany's ability to project force in the Red Sea was entirely contingent on a support architecture - logistics, basing rights, intelligence sharing - that it had not built and could not unilaterally sustain. Strategic culture shaped the form of German participation. Material dependency shaped its limits (German Federal Government, 2022).

France occupied a different position. Its stronger defence-industrial base and long-standing advocacy of European strategic autonomy gave Paris greater capacity for independent action than most European allies. Yet French policy in the Red Sea remained calibrated toward defensive engagement, reflecting both regional diplomatic interests and the continuing costs of unilateral escalation (Posen, 2014).

What emerges from these cases is not a picture of European failure but of a specific kind of institutional maturity that is still in-

complete. European governments have learned to act collectively under an EU institutional umbrella. They have not yet built the underlying capabilities that would make that umbrella genuinely weather-resistant in high-intensity or geographically distant crises (Brands, 2022). The gap between the two is where the concept of conditional alliance cohesion does its most important analytical work: cohesion is preserved because the EU label allows governments to participate without fully merging with American escalation strategy, but the participation itself remains bounded by dependencies that strategic autonomy discourse has not yet closed (Rynning, 2024).

This is a more productive diagnosis than either the triumphalist reading - *ASPIDES* proves Europe can act independently - or the defeatist one - Europe is simply a junior partner with institutional decoration. The evidence instead points to an alliance in institutional transition: capable of differentiation, but not yet capable of fully autonomous European operational sustainment. Whether that transition accelerates or stalls will depend less on the speeches European leaders give about autonomy and more on whether defence investment decisions made between 2024 and 2030 close the capability gaps that *ASPIDES* made visible (Acharya, 2018).

The following table maps these divergences across the principal alliance actors, using four operational indicators: direct military participation in offensive strikes, signature of the joint statement of January 2024, institutional framework of engagement, and the presence or absence of parliamentary or constitutional constraints on deployment scope. These criteria are drawn from documented behaviour during the crisis rather than from stated policy positions, and they allow escalation tolerance to be assessed against observable decisions rather than political rhetoric.

**Table 2.** Comparative Patterns of Transatlantic Strategic Responses during the Iran War<sup>1</sup>

| Actor          | Primary Threat Interpretation                    | Operational Behaviour                                            | Escalation Tolerance | Strategic Logic                                 |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| United States  | Credibility and deterrence failure               | Offensive maritime deterrence and coalition leadership           | High                 | Stability through coercive deterrence           |
| Britain        | Atlantic solidarity and maritime protection      | Direct military participation alongside Washington               | Relatively high      | Preservation of Atlantic strategic alignment    |
| France         | Regional stabilisation and strategic flexibility | Defensive maritime engagement with diplomatic autonomy           | Moderate             | Strategic autonomy within alliance coordination |
| Germany        | Maritime security under institutional restraint  | Restricted defensive participation under parliamentary oversight | Low to moderate      | Controlled engagement and escalation avoidance  |
| European Union | Trade protection and de-escalatory stabilisation | Operation Aspides and defensive maritime coordination            | Defensive            | Stability through risk containment              |

Source: Elaborated by author.

The table shows a layered pattern of participation rather than a single alliance-wide response. Britain accepted a higher level of escalation within a US-led framework; France preserved greater diplomatic and operational distance; Germany participated under explicit parliamentary and institutional constraints; and the EU established a defensive framework designed around a narrower political consensus. These differences support the argument that participation was conditioned by strategic culture, domestic institutions, and exposure to escalation costs rather than by a uniform alliance logic.

**Structural divergence  
or temporary crisis?  
Reassessing the future  
of the transatlantic  
alliance**

A central question emerging from the Iran war concerns whether the tensions exposed during the crisis represent temporary policy disagreements or evidence of a deeper structural transformation within the transatlantic alliance. NATO has survived

<sup>1</sup> Escalation tolerance is assessed across four indicators: (1) direct participation in offensive strikes against Houthi targets; (2) signature of the joint ten-country statement of January 2024; (3) institutional framework of naval deployment - US-led coalition, EU mandate, or bilateral; (4) presence of binding parliamentary or constitutional constraints on offensive engagement. High tolerance reflects positive indicators across all four dimensions. Low to moderate tolerance reflects selective defensive participation under formal institutional and parliamentary constraint with no offensive strike involvement.

major disputes before, including Suez, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Historical experience therefore cautions against interpreting every episode of disagreement as proof of institutional decline. Alliances frequently experience internal tension while remaining strategically functional over the long term (Kaplan, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

The Iran war, however, differed from many earlier disputes because it unfolded within a broader environment of geopolitical fragmentation, economic vulnerability, and overlapping crises. The disagreement was not limited to a single military operation or isolated policy dispute. Instead, it reflected wider changes in how alliance members interpret security, escalation, economic exposure, and geopolitical order under contemporary multipolar conditions.

The argument advanced in this study is not that NATO is collapsing or approaching institutional disintegration. Rather, the alliance appears to be entering a phase of structural differentiation in which institutional cohesion survives while strategic consensus weakens progressively outside the core domain of European territorial defence. The Iran war did not create this transformation by itself, but it exposed trends already developing inside the alliance system.

Three developments make the Iran crisis more analytically consequential than a discrete policy dispute. First, it occurred in an international environment of overlapping security, economic, and geopolitical pressures rather than within an isolated regional confrontation. Second, American and European approaches to escalation have evolved along increasingly different trajectories, particularly in relation to risk toler-

ance and out-of-area military engagement. Third, contemporary alliance politics is shaped increasingly by uneven economic exposure to energy, maritime, and supply-chain disruption. Taken together, these conditions make differentiated participation more likely even where formal alliance commitments remain stable.

These developments reinforce the article's concept of conditional alliance cohesion. NATO remains highly cohesive when alliance members perceive threats similarly and experience comparable levels of vulnerability. Cohesion becomes more selective when crises involve uneven exposure, contested escalation logic, and competing strategic priorities.

The comparison between the Ukraine war and the Iran war illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. Russia's invasion of Ukraine generated unusually high levels of transatlantic unity because the threat was geographically direct, politically legible, and closely tied to European territorial security. The escalation surrounding Iran produced weaker convergence because alliance members interpreted the crisis through different strategic frameworks.

The contrast reflects the uneven distribution of strategic and economic exposure across the alliance, which shaped different preferences regarding escalation and participation. The alliance remained operationally functional, but political alignment became increasingly differentiated. In operational terms, this produces a more variable geometry of participation within the alliance. Participation levels increasingly vary according to geography, economic exposure, domestic legitimacy, and escalation tolerance. Some states contribute

<sup>2</sup> The EU is included as an institutional framework of collective European action rather than as a NATO member actor

militarily, others diplomatically, others economically, and some primarily symbolically. Institutional cohesion survives because flexibility allows governments to adapt participation to national constraints and political realities.

Such flexibility carries both stabilising and destabilising implications:

On the one hand, selective cooperation may strengthen NATO's institutional durability. Alliances capable of accommodating diversity are often more resilient than rigid systems requiring complete consensus (Snyder, 1997). Flexible participation reduces the likelihood that disagreement over one crisis will escalate into broader institutional rupture.

On the other, repeated operational differentiation may gradually weaken shared alliance identity. Alliances depend not only on formal commitments and operational coordination, but also on political trust and common assumptions regarding solidarity. If alliance members increasingly interpret crises through incompatible strategic vocabularies, mutual expectations regarding reliability may erode gradually over time.

Such divergence may become increasingly important in future crises involving Taiwan, Indo-Pacific competition, cyber conflict, or maritime confrontation. The more geopolitics becomes globally interconnected, the more likely it becomes that alliance members will disagree regarding strategic prioritisation and acceptable escalation costs.

Importantly, structural divergence does not automatically imply alliance collapse. NATO continues to provide indispensable military coordination, intelligence integration, deterrence infrastructure, and political consultation mechanisms. Europe still depends heavily on American capabilities, while the

US continues benefiting from alliance legitimacy and European strategic partnership (Rynning, 2024).

The more plausible outcome is therefore transformation rather than dissolution. NATO appears increasingly likely to evolve into a layered alliance system characterised by strong cohesion regarding European territorial defence, moderate cohesion regarding broader systemic threats, and selective coordination regarding regional crises outside Europe.

Such an alliance would remain institutionally powerful while becoming strategically more pluralistic. The Iran war ultimately demonstrated that the future of transatlantic relations depends less on restoring Cold War-style consensus and more on managing strategic asymmetry within an increasingly fragmented international order.

## **Counterargument: crisis disagreement or structural transformation?**

A plausible counterargument is that the Iran crisis represents another episode of policy disagreement rather than evidence of structural transformation. NATO survived substantial disputes over Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and burden-sharing without losing its institutional centrality. Institutional survival, moreover, has never required complete strategic consensus. The argument advanced here is therefore narrower: the Iran crisis matters because it illustrates a change in the form through which cohesion is maintained, with negotiated differentiation increasingly substituting for uniform operational alignment in out-of-area crises.

The evidence presented throughout this study supports this narrower reading. European governments did not reject alliance coordination or withdraw from maritime security efforts; instead, they redistributed participation across defensive naval deployments, intelligence sharing, diplomatic engagement, sanctions coordination, and restricted operational mandates. The alliance remained institutionally functional while becoming operationally differentiated, which is the phenomenon this article is concerned with, rather than the abstract question of unity versus division.

The more relevant analytical question, in other words, is not whether NATO remains unified or divided, but under what conditions cohesion holds and under what conditions participation becomes selective and politically constrained – a distinction the remainder of this article treats as a variable to be explained rather than a verdict to be reached.

## **Regional mediation and the infrastructure of wartime stability**

Regional actors capable of sustaining mediation, communication, and logistical access constitute an important component of wartime stability in the Middle East. These actors may be understood here as peace-facilitating intermediaries. Much of the literature on regional conflict focuses on war proxies: armed groups, militias, and aligned actors that extend confrontation across borders and make conflict more difficult to contain. The Iran war, however, also reveals the importance of actors that perform the opposite function. Peace proxies do not eliminate strategic rivalry, but they reduce its destructive spillover by

preserving communication, supporting mediation, facilitating indirect dialogue, and maintaining limited channels of regional order.

These peace-facilitating intermediaries can be distinguished from adjacent categories such as traditional mediators, middle powers, and bridge states. Traditional mediators operate with explicit mandates from belligerent parties and seek to end conflict; their role is episodic and terminates with the negotiation itself. Middle powers are defined structurally by their relative capabilities within the international system, not by the functions they perform during active hostilities. Bridge states describe geographic or civilisational positioning, not wartime operational behaviour. In this article, peace-facilitating intermediaries are identified functionally and temporally: they are actors who, during active conflict, sustain the connective infrastructure of diplomacy – keeping trade corridors open, maintaining backchannel communications, preserving the institutional architecture through which eventual resolution becomes possible – and who do so not as neutral bystanders but as interested parties converting their positional advantage into durable strategic and economic capital. The distinction matters because it shifts analytical attention from what these actors say about conflict to what they do within it.

Jordan, Oman, and Egypt illustrate this role in different ways. Jordan's strategic value lies in its ability to function as a stabilising corridor between the Levant, the Gulf, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Its relevance during escalation is connected to border management, intelligence coordination, refugee pressures, humanitarian access, and the preservation of regional communication channels. Oman has long operated as a discreet diplomatic intermediary, especially in conflicts involving Iran and Western actors, because its for-

oreign policy rests on maintaining working relations across rival camps. Egypt, by contrast, combines mediation capacity with control over critical geopolitical infrastructure, especially the Suez Canal and its role in Gaza-related diplomacy. These cases show that regional influence during war is not measured only by coercive power. It is also measured by the ability to keep mediation, trade, and crisis-management channels alive.

The concept of peace proxies therefore strengthens the article's broader argument about conditional alliance cohesion. Western alliances may preserve institutional solidarity, yet their ability to manage crises outside Europe increasingly depends on regional actors capable of producing wartime stability. In fragmented conflict environments, peace proxies become part of the wider infrastructure through which escalation is contained, flows are protected, and diplomatic options remain open. Their role also demonstrates how states can convert wartime vulnerability into strategic opportunity: by becoming indispensable to medi-

ation, logistics, humanitarian access, or regional communication, they accumulate influence that outlasts the immediate crisis.

**Conclusion: conditional cohesion and the transformation of the transatlantic alliance**

The Iran crisis did not break the transatlantic alliance. It showed that the alliance can remain institutionally intact while becoming strategically less automatic. Washington approached the crisis primarily through the logic of deterrence credibility and strategic signalling. Several European governments approached the same escalation through concerns over regional spillover, maritime insecurity, inflationary pressure, energy vulnerability, and economic disruption. The disagreement therefore reflected different theories of how stability should be preserved under conditions of regional escalation.

**Table 3.** Comparative Functions of Wartime Stability Mechanisms

| Mechanism                                      | Function                                                     | Operational Logic                        | Illustrative Examples                             |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Wartime Stability                              | Protecting flows, corridors, mediation channels              | Preserving limited order during conflict | ASPIDES, Red Sea maritime protection              |
| Strategic Diversification                      | Multiple partners, routes, energy sources, diplomatic tracks | Reducing exposure to disruption          | EU-led maritime framework, energy diversification |
| Regional Mediation / Peace-facilitating actors | Mediation, backchannels, regional communication              | Containing escalation                    | Jordan, Oman, Egypt                               |

Source: Elaborated by author.

NATO remained operationally functional throughout the crisis, yet participation became increasingly selective. Britain aligned directly with Washington in military strikes against Houthi targets, while the EU pursued a separate defensive framework through Operation Aspides. Germany contributed through defensive maritime deployment under institutional constraints, whereas France, Italy, and Spain avoided participation in offensive escalation. Transatlantic security coordination was therefore sustained through differentiated participation across NATO members, national coalitions, and the separate EU framework rather than through a single operational response.

The deeper significance of the Iran crisis lies in what it reveals about the changing nature of stability during war. Contemporary conflicts do not only test military deterrence. They test the ability of alliances and regional actors to preserve flows, corridors, mediation channels, and economic connectivity while escalation continues. War-time stability therefore becomes a central strategic function. It allows actors to contain disruption, protect vital routes, sustain diplomatic communication, and prevent regional conflict from producing wider systemic breakdown.

Strategic diversification is one of the main tools through which this wartime stability is produced. Exposed states increasingly diversify security frameworks, energy sources, logistical routes, and diplomatic channels in order to reduce dependence and avoid forced alignment. This diversification does not weaken alliances by definition. It can make them more durable by

allowing governments to remain within shared institutions while adjusting their participation to domestic constraints, economic exposure, and escalation tolerance.

The analysis also indicates that wartime exposure can create uneven forms of strategic opportunity. States able to preserve trade, communication, or mediation functions during prolonged escalation may acquire greater diplomatic or logistical relevance. This possibility merits further study, particularly in relation to small and middle powers positioned around critical regional corridors.

Regional mediation is consequently part of the wider architecture through which war-time stability is sustained. Jordan, Oman, and Egypt illustrate how states that preserve diplomatic access, logistical connectivity, or crisis communication can complement alliance-based deterrence by providing channels for de-escalation.

The Iran crisis therefore points toward a more conditional form of transatlantic cohesion. Institutional solidarity can remain durable even as operational participation varies across crises, provided that allies retain mechanisms for consultation, burden management, and differentiated participation. The central implication is not that NATO is fragmenting, but that cohesion outside the alliance's core territorial mission increasingly depends on the capacity to accommodate strategic asymmetry. The durability of the transatlantic relationship may therefore rest less on restoring uniformity than on managing difference without allowing operational divergence to erode institutional trust.

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