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FORUMUL SECURITĂȚII MARITIME

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# RĂZBOIUL SUA–IRAN DIN 2026

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*Prin prisma gândirii strategice a lui Zbigniew Brzezinski*

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O evaluare geostrategică, juridică și sistemică a conflictului



București, aprilie 2026

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**MARITIME SECURITY FORUM**  
**STRATEGIC ANALYSIS**

**THE 2026 US-IRAN WAR THROUGH THE LENS**  
**ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI'S STRATEGIC THINKING**

*A geostrategic assessment of the conflict and its implications*

**AUTHORS: Capt. (ret.) Dr Sorin LEARSCHI<sup>1</sup>    Admiral (ret.) Dr Aurel POPA<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Director – Maritime Security Forum

<sup>2</sup> Chairman – Maritime Security Forum

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## Abstract

*This article provides a theoretically grounded and empirically informed analysis of the 2026 United States–Iran conflict through the strategic framework developed by Zbigniew Brzezinski. It argues that the confrontation reflects a broader systemic transformation characterised by the erosion of American primacy and the emergence of multipolar dynamics. By conceptualising Iran as a geopolitical pivot, the article demonstrates how geographic positioning and asymmetric capabilities enable disproportionate influence within the Eurasian system. The study further examines the nuclear dimension of the conflict through the lens of security dilemma theory and deterrence logic, highlighting the paradox whereby efforts to prevent proliferation may actually accelerate it. In addition, the article analyses the implications for maritime security, particularly regarding critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, and evaluates the legality of strategic actions under international law. Ultimately, the article contends that the 2026 conflict underscores the structural limits of unilateral force and reinforces the necessity of multilateral governance frameworks in sustaining international order.*

**Keywords:** United States; Iran; Brzezinski; geopolitics; nuclear deterrence; security dilemma; maritime security; UNCLOS; multipolarity; international law.

**JEL Codes:** F51, F52, F53

## **INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT CHESSBOARD IS REIGNITED**

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched coordinated, on a large scale, against the Islamic Republic of Iran – dubbed ‘Operation Epic Fury’ by Washington and ‘Operation Lion’s Roar’ by Tel Aviv – ushering in the most strategic armed conflict directly involving a regional power with nuclear ambitions since the 1991 Gulf War. The assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic, followed by the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz and Iran’s retaliatory ballistic missile and drone strikes against Israel, US bases in the region and Arab Gulf nations hosting US military assets, has brutally reconfigured the security architecture of the wider Middle East.

This analysis offers an interpretation of current events through the lens of two seminal works by the Polish-American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski: *\*The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives\** (1997) and *\*The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership\** (2004). Far from being outdated, Brzezinski’s work offers a remarkably incisive analytical framework for understanding the geopolitical dynamics that led to the current conflict and for anticipating its strategic consequences in the medium and long term.

Brzezinski warned, nearly three decades ago, that American hegemony over what he called the ‘Eurasian Chessboard’ depended on Washington’s ability to prevent the emergence of recalcitrant regional powers that threatened US control over the five geostrategic ‘bridgeheads’: Western Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia and South Asia. Iran — in his view, a “geopolitical pivot” — was identified as a critically important actor, whose strategic orientation would substantially determine the future of the international order across the entire Eurasian landscape<sup>3</sup>

The Maritime Security Forum, in line with its aim of assessing the threats and opportunities affecting global and regional maritime security, approaches this conflict not merely as a bilateral US-Iran confrontation, but as a systemic stress test of the post-Cold War international order – one with direct implications for freedom of navigation, energy supply chains, the cohesion of alliances, and the security of states in geopolitically sensitive positions, including Romania. This analysis is based on the conviction that Brzezinski’s dual intellectual legacy – the realist architecture of *The Grand Chessboard* and the normative ambition of *The Choice* – offers the most coherent conceptual lens through which to assess both the causes and consequences of the 2026 war.

## **2. THE CONTEXT OF ESCALATION: FROM MAXIMUM PRESSURE TO DIRECT CONFRONTATION**

### **2.1 The anatomy of a predictable conflict**

The 2026 conflict did not arise *ex nihilo*. It represents the culmination of a succession of gradual escalations following the inexorable logic of what Brzezinski described as the ‘ ’ competition for control of the Eurasian chessboard. With the reintroduction of the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign by the Trump administration upon its return to the White House in January 2025, the collapse of the Iranian rial — exacerbated by new international sanctions imposed in September

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<sup>3</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 31.

2025, following the “12-Day War” — triggered a deep economic crisis in Iran. By the end of December 2025, mass protests had erupted in over a hundred Iranian cities, some of the largest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, rapidly evolving into explicit calls to overthrow the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian government responded with lethal force. The massacres of 8 and 10 January 2026 resulted in between 7,000 and 32,000 documented civilian deaths, according to varying estimates by HRANA, Iranian non-governmental health officials and government sources<sup>4</sup>. President Donald Trump threatened explicit military intervention if the regime killed peaceful protesters, whilst simultaneously initiating the largest concentration of US air power in the region since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The indirect nuclear negotiations held in Muscat and Geneva under Omani mediation, which lasted from April to June 2025, collapsed mainly due to Iran’s insistence on its “inalienable right” to enrich uranium and the IAEA’s revelations regarding a stockpile of highly enriched uranium hidden in an underground facility in Isfahan<sup>5</sup>.

The Twelve-Day War of June 2025, in which Israel struck Iranian military and nuclear infrastructure with America’s tacit support, significantly degraded Tehran’s defensive capabilities. Iran’s regional proxies — Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iraqi Shia militias — had already been substantially eroded during Israel’s 2023–2024 campaign. The Assad government in Syria collapsed in December 2024. Against this backdrop, Washington and Tel Aviv calculated that the military window of opportunity would not be more favourable, proceeding to launch Operation Epic Fury and Operation Roaring Lion on 28 February 2026 – in the midst of ongoing negotiations in Islamabad.

## 2.2 Brzezinski’s interpretation of the escalation

Brzezinski warned in *The Grand Chessboard* that American dominance in Eurasia is a “transitory product” and that its perpetuation requires a prudent foreign policy, capable of co-opting regional actors rather than confronting them through coercion<sup>6</sup>. He identified Iran as a “geopolitical pivot” whose strategic choices — cooperation or resistance to American influence — would profoundly shape the security of the entire Eurasian space. Paradoxically, the military option adopted by the Trump administration in 2026 appears to contradict Brzezinski’s recommendations in *The Choice* (2004), in which he strongly advocated responsible American multilateralism, as opposed to unilateral “imperial temptation”.

In *\*The Choice\**, Brzezinski argued that an America which opts for ‘global domination’ rather than ‘global leadership’ risks turning allies into satellites, partners into adversaries, and fostering systemic anti-Americanism. The attack launched whilst negotiations were ongoing – a fact highlighted by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, who described the action as ‘totally unprovoked, illegal and illegitimate’ – illustrates precisely the kind of hegemonic behaviour that Brzezinski condemned as structurally destabilising in the long term. Russia’s characterisation of the entire region as being ‘in flames’ and China’s calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities confirm that US military action has significantly eroded Washington’s diplomatic credibility among the major powers.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the escalation must also be understood through the prism of the interdependence between the internal pressures and external constraints of the actors involved. The Iranian regime, facing simultaneous internal delegitimation and international isolation, was driven towards a logic of aggressive resilience, in which demonstrating the capacity to retaliate became essential for political survival. Symmetrically, the US administration operated within a strategic framework dominated by imperatives of credibility and deterrence, where inaction would have been interpreted as systemic weakness.

This convergence of antagonistic security logics generated what strategic literature defines as an ‘inevitable spiral of escalation’, in which every defensive action is perceived by the adversary as offensive, amplifying the cycle of confrontation. In this light, the 2026 conflict is not merely the result of a specific political decision, but the expression of a structural incompatibility between two security paradigms.

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<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), Preliminary Report on Casualties in January 2026 (Washington, D.C.: HRANA, January 2026), cited in Wikipedia, “2026 Iran War”, accessed 11 April 2026 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026\\_Iran\\_war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_war).

<sup>5</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 198.

<sup>6</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 9.

### 3. IRAN AS A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT: BRZEZINSKI'S FRAMEWORK APPLIED

#### 3.1 Iran in the Geometry of Power – Zbigniew Brzezinski's View

In *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski provided a precise taxonomy of the geopolitically relevant actors on the Eurasian chessboard: “active players” — states with the capacity and will to project power beyond their own borders — and “geopolitical pivots” — states whose importance derives not from their own power, but from their sensitive position and the effect their strategic orientation has on major players<sup>7</sup>. Iran was explicitly placed in the category of geopolitical pivots, alongside Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea and Turkey. Control over Iran — or at least the neutralisation of its hostility — was perceived as essential for consolidating the American presence in the area of “vital interest”: the wider Middle East, with its energy resources and strategic maritime corridors.

In the context of 2026, Iran's role as a geopolitical pivot is confirmed with particular force. Tehran's decision to partially close the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20 per cent of the world's oil passes, demonstrated that a regional power with limited military capabilities but a strategic geographical position can nevertheless impose asymmetric costs on the global economy, exceeding those generated by many conventional military operations. This validates Brzezinski's central insight: in the Eurasian geopolitical game, location and connectivity often outweigh raw military power.

Furthermore, Iran's ability to activate a network of non-state proxies across the region — Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen — represents the kind of diffuse projection of power that Brzezinski's framework, anchored in classical geopolitics, only partially anticipated. The ‘Axis of Resistance’ functions as an asymmetric multiplier of Iran's strategic influence, transforming what would otherwise be a bilateral US–Iran conflict into a multi-front regional conflagration with global consequences.

#### 3.2 The Strait of Hormuz and the maritime dimension of the conflict

One of Iran's most powerful instruments of retaliation in the current conflict is the controlled restriction of the Strait of Hormuz. The statement by interim Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, according to which the strait would remain ‘closed’ as leverage against Washington, generated immediate reactions on global markets and triggered a diplomatic scramble to identify alternative supply routes. On 11 April 2026 — the date of this analysis — a fragile two-week ceasefire was being negotiated in Islamabad, but Iran was imposing a limit of no more than fifteen ships per day authorised to transit the strait, with tanker traffic having virtually collapsed.

From the perspective of maritime security – the core mission of the Maritime Security Forum – the restriction on the Strait of Hormuz sets an extremely dangerous precedent. The UN Maritime Transport Agency (IMO), IAEA officials and commercial operators have warned that freedom of navigation, one of the fundamental pillars of the international maritime order, is threatened not only by direct kinetic acts but also by the imposition of transit conditions – practices which the CEO of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, Sultan Al Jaber, has publicly described as setting “a dangerous precedent for the world, undermining the principle of freedom of navigation that underpins global trade.” South Korea has sent ships on alternative routes via the port of Yanbu in Saudi Arabia to circumvent the disruption, whilst the IAEA has warned that the strikes near the Bushehr nuclear power plant pose “a very real danger to nuclear safety”.

Brzezinski did not explicitly address maritime security in the works analysed here, preferring a predominantly land-based framework of Eurasian dominance. Nevertheless, his geopolitical logic is fully applicable: control over the maritime corridors of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea is coextensive with control over the energy flows that fuel the economies of East Asia – a first-order element of power on the chessboard of the 21st century. A possible resurgence of the Houthis to block the Bab el-Mandeb Strait would extend the maritime threat to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, further constricting global energy supply lines.

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<sup>7</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, “The Iran War of 2026”, accessed 11 April 2026  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iran-war>.

## 4. AMERICAN PRIMACY: BETWEEN HEGEMONY AND LEADERSHIP

### 4.1 The Brzezinski Dilemma of American Power

The Choice (2004) is, in essence, a meditation on the fundamental dilemma of American power at the turn of the millennium: how can the United States maintain its dominant position without alienating the international community through unilateral excesses? Brzezinski identified two symmetrical and equally dangerous temptations: the ‘imperial temptation’ — the use of brute force to impose the American will, ignoring international consensus — and the ‘temptation of withdrawal’ — the abandonment of global commitments under pressure from internal and external obstacles<sup>8</sup>.

Operation Epic Fury appears to illustrate the first temptation in all its complexity. The Trump administration offered various and sometimes contradictory justifications for initiating the conflict: preventing an imminent Iranian attack, destroying missile capabilities, neutralising the nuclear programme, seizing Iranian hydrocarbon resources, and bringing about regime change by empowering the Iranian opposition. This multitude of rationales — some explicitly rejected by US officials themselves and by the IAEA — suggests that the military decision preceded, rather than followed, strategic deliberation.

Brzezinski emphasised in *The Grand Chessboard* that American supremacy is legitimate and stabilising to the extent that it is exercised through consent and partnership, not through coercion. He explicitly warned: ‘The United States, unable to inspire or persuade, will be forced to coerce, and coercion breeds resistance’<sup>9</sup>. The attack launched whilst negotiations were still ongoing confirms this warning with striking accuracy. The international reaction — condemnation from Russia and China, unease among European allies, and the ambivalence of the Arab Gulf states, simultaneously dependent on American protection and exposed to Iranian reprisals — reflects precisely the erosion of American soft power that Brzezinski feared.

### 4.2 Strategic overstretch and the dispersion of resources

The conflict with Iran places the United States in the strategic situation that Brzezinski considered the most dangerous: the simultaneous dispersal of military effort across multiple fronts. As of 11 April 2026, the United States is involved or deeply involved in: large-scale air operations against Iran (CENTCOM reporting over 13,000 successful strikes against Iranian military targets); the anti-Hezbollah campaign in support of Israel in Lebanon; anti-Houthi pressure in Yemen; continued support for Ukraine against Russian aggression; and maintaining deterrence against China in the Indo-Pacific. This overstretch of American power — what Brzezinski called the risk of ‘imperial overstretch’, echoing Paul Kennedy’s earlier formulation — raises serious questions about strategic sustainability in the medium term<sup>10</sup>.

The fundamental question that Brzezinski posed regarding any military adventure in the wider Middle East remains unanswered in the current conflict: what is the exit strategy, and who will govern the day after? The Iraqi experience of 2003 – explicitly cited by several analysts in relation to the current crisis – illustrates the danger of a tactical victory unaccompanied by a coherent political vision for the post-conflict order. The Trump administration’s diverse and shifting justifications for war, as noted by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, range from preventing Iranian nuclear weapons to regime change – objectives that entail fundamentally different end-states and political requirements for compliance.

In this context, a fundamental tension arises between globally projected military capability and the domestic political sustainability of the American commitment. The cumulative costs of simultaneous engagement across multiple operational theatres – financial, human and institutional – risk generating a progressive erosion of domestic consensus regarding the global role of the United States.

This dynamic reflects what Brzezinski foresaw as the structural limit of hegemony: the inability to maintain both strategic dominance and internal cohesion without a recalibration of foreign policy objectives. In the absence of such a recalibration, the risk is not only military overextension, but also the fragmentation of domestic political will, with direct implications for Washington’s strategic predictability.

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<sup>8</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 217–219.

<sup>9</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 214–215.

<sup>10</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *\*The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives\** (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 214–215.

## 5. THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION: PROLIFERATION OR DETERRENCE?

Iran's nuclear programme constituted, at least officially, the main *casus belli* for the military operations of 2026. On 27 February 2026 – one day before the attacks were launched – the IAEA reported that Iran had hidden highly enriched uranium in an underground facility in Isfahan, stating that it could not guarantee the 'exclusively peaceful' nature of the programme. However, the same agency clarified that it had found no evidence of an organised nuclear weapons programme and that previous DIA estimates suggested Iran would need a decade to develop missiles capable of reaching US territory. President Trump, in his State of the Union address on 24 February, stated that Iran had resumed its nuclear programme and was developing missiles capable of striking the United States – claims not corroborated by independent assessments.

Brzezinski did not directly address Iranian nuclear proliferation in his 1997 and 2004 works – reflecting the programme's less advanced stage at that time. However, his principles remain fully applicable: he argued that threats to core security require sustainable diplomatic responses, rather than military interventions that might upset the regional balance without eliminating the structural causes of insecurity. If the military strikes of 2025 and 2026 have set back Iran's nuclear programme by two years, as the Department of Defence estimates, this window of opportunity can only be exploited if accompanied by a robust diplomatic framework – a condition that the current ceasefire negotiations in Islamabad appear far from meeting<sup>11</sup>.

There is a fundamental paradox inherent in the US nuclear strategy towards Iran: military operations designed to destroy Iran's nuclear programme may, in the medium term, increase Tehran's motivation to rebuild it clandestinely, concluding – following the North Korean model – that nuclear weapons are the only effective guarantee of the regime's survival against US military power. Brzezinski would have immediately recognised this coercive dialectic: the use of brute force to deter undesirable behaviour may, paradoxically, produce precisely the behaviours one seeks to prevent. It is precisely this dynamic that makes the absence of a credible post-conflict diplomatic framework so strategically dangerous.

An additional dimension to the nuclear issue is the effect of regional contagion. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have repeatedly signalled that they will not remain passive in the face of an Iran perceived to be on the verge of achieving military nuclear status. Consequently, the 2026 conflict risks triggering a regional nuclear arms race, with major implications for the global non-proliferation regime.

This prospect underscores the importance of a post-conflict diplomatic solution that includes robust verification mechanisms and comprehensive security guarantees. In the absence of these, the regional nuclear balance could shift from a latent state of deterrence to one of active proliferation, which would be far more unstable and difficult to manage.

## 6. REGIONAL TURBULENCE: RUSSIA, CHINA AND THE EURASIAN BALANCE

Brzezinski warned in *The Grand Chessboard* that the main risk to American primacy was not a frontal attack by a single rival power, but the formation of anti-hegemonic coalitions — formal or informal — capable of counterbalancing American influence in key regions of Eurasia. He identified the scenario of a "grand coalition comprising China, Russia and, perhaps, Iran" as the "most dangerous" possible combination for American interests, given its capacity to challenge US dominance across the entire Eurasian continent. The 2026 conflict creates the preconditions for such a coalition dynamic, even if its formal manifestation remains tentative.

Russia, still embroiled in Ukraine, has characterised the US-Iran conflict as evidence of American imperialism, thereby securing a first-rate propaganda asset. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that "the level of tension in the region is rising and continues to rise" and that "the entire region is ablaze" – language calibrated to portray Washington as a destabilising actor in world affairs. Russia's interest in prolonged American involvement in the Middle East is structural: it diverts the US's strategic focus and resources away from the European theatre, narrows the political scope of support for Ukraine, and generates economic benefits from rising energy prices.

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<sup>11</sup> Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, "The War Against Iran and Global Risks: Tell Me How This Ends", Georgetown University, April 2026, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/conflict-security/the-war-against-iran-and-global-risks-tell-me-how-this-ends/>.

China, Iran's main oil customer, has economic and strategic motivations to support – indirectly – Tehran's ability to resist. Beijing's calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities, couched in the language of international law and multilateralism, position China as a responsible counterweight to the great power of American unilateralism. This diplomatic stance costs China nothing militarily, whilst bringing significant normative benefits in the Global South. Brzezinski would have recognised this as a classic illustration of his warning: unilateral American military action inevitably strengthens the moral authority of those — including authoritarian rivals — who invoke the principles of the international order that Washington is seen as violating.

Pakistan's role in the current crisis deserves particular attention. Islamabad is hosting the ceasefire negotiations scheduled for 12 April 2026, positioning itself as an indispensable mediator. Pakistan — a nuclear state which, according to some assessments, has supplied nuclear technology to Iran — is itself a 'geopolitical pivot' in Brzezinski's taxonomy, whose stability is essential to the security of South Asia. Its involvement in mediating the US-Iran conflict adds a layer of complexity to an already complex strategic picture, whilst also reflecting the emergence of new regional diplomatic configurations that traditional Western-oriented frameworks struggle to accommodate.

Turkey, another 'geopolitical pivot' identified by Brzezinski, has adopted a stance of active neutrality, avoiding involvement in the conflict and keeping diplomatic channels open with all parties. This position illustrates both the growing assertiveness of middle powers within the Eurasian system and the gradual erosion of the binary alliance architecture that structured international relations during the Cold War era. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which host US bases and have been the target of Iranian attacks, face a difficult strategic calculus: dependence on the US security umbrella versus vulnerability to Iranian retaliation, exacerbated by the fact that the Strait of Hormuz remains partially blocked – disrupting even the hydrocarbon exports on which their economic models depend.

Furthermore, the conflict highlights the emergence of a fluid multipolar model, in which alliances are no longer fixed but contextual and transactional. Regional actors optimise their positions not through rigid alignment but through strategic balancing between the great powers.

This transformation reduces the international system's capacity to generate stability through coherent power blocs and amplifies strategic uncertainty. In this context, the role of geopolitical pivots becomes not merely relevant, but decisive, as they can tip the regional balance without possessing military supremacy of their own.

## **7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MARITIME SECURITY: HORMUZ AND GLOBAL TRADE**

### **7.1 Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb: The vulnerable corridors of the world order**

Global maritime security is currently under threat on two simultaneous fronts. The first is the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran's partial blockade has already led to a significant rise in oil prices and a forced reorganisation of global commercial shipping routes. South Korea has sent ships on alternative routes via Saudi Arabia, Japan's Nikkei 225 and Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index have risen on reports of possible ceasefire negotiations, and the IAEA has warned that attacks near the Bushehr nuclear facility pose "a very real danger to nuclear safety". At the time of writing, only one oil tanker had passed through the Strait of Hormuz in the last twenty-four hours, according to Reuters, whilst Iran was imposing a limit of fifteen ships per day under the ceasefire provisions.

The second chokepoint, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, is threatened by a resurgence of Houthi activity. Security sources indicate that Houthi forces, which had suspended attacks on the Red Sea since October 2025 following the Gaza peace plan, have resumed missile and drone attacks on Israel and opened a new front in the expanding regional conflict, starting on 28 March 2026. Plans for incursions into the Arabian Sea and the exploitation of cells established on the African side of the Red Sea would, it seems, represent a further escalation that would constrain the global maritime supply chain from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

### **7.2 Dangerous precedents for freedom of navigation**

Restricting the transit of oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz – whether through physical closure, imposed quotas or toll schemes – represents a direct challenge to the principle of freedom of navigation enshrined in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The IMO has declared any political restriction on navigation to be categorically unacceptable. Sultan Al Jaber, CEO of ADNOC, articulated the stakes precisely: “The Strait was not built, designed, financed or constructed by any state. Turning this vital waterway into a weapon is, in no way, tenable. This would set a dangerous precedent for the world.” President Trump, for his part, issued stark warnings against Iran’s toll-charging schemes via Truth Social, but the actual reopening of the strait remains uncertain even under the proposed ceasefire.

If Iran succeeds in imposing and maintaining a conditional transit regime without facing proportionate and lasting repercussions, this will set a precedent that other regional actors could exploit: China in the Taiwan Strait or the Strait of Malacca, Russia in Arctic maritime areas, or others who might be watching this test case with strategic interest. The Maritime Security Forum has consistently maintained that the fundamental principle of freedom of navigation cannot be defended selectively – it is either universal or it is not. The current conflict therefore poses a systemic challenge not only to energy security, but also to the entire structure of international maritime law.

From the perspective of Brzezinski’s analytical framework, the threat to Hormuz confirms his central thesis: whoever controls the infrastructure of Eurasian power controls the destiny of the world order. The maritime corridors of the Persian Gulf are not peripheral geography – they represent the capillary system of the global economy. The United States, which is committing major military resources to the destruction of Iranian military facilities whilst failing to ensure sustainable freedom of navigation, will achieve tactical success at the expense of a strategic objective. Brzezinski would have insisted that the measure of geopolitical success lies not in the number of strikes carried out, but in the quality of the order subsequently established.

In the medium term, this situation may lead to the heightened militarisation of critical maritime routes, including through an increased naval presence by major powers and the expansion of escort operations for commercial shipping. Although these measures may provide temporary stability, they contribute to the transformation of maritime spaces from areas of economic transit into zones of direct strategic competition.

This development marks a significant shift in the nature of global maritime security, in which the economic dimension becomes inseparable from the military one, and freedom of navigation can no longer be taken for granted, but is an objective requiring active and continuous protection.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS FOR KEY ACTORS**

### **8.1 The United States**

The United States, following the launch of Operation Epic Fury, is facing the strategic consequences of the choice that Brzezinski termed “global domination”, to the detriment of “global leadership”. The tactical success of the first phase of air operations is undisputed: the assassination of Khamenei, the significant degradation of Iran’s military and accessible nuclear infrastructure, as well as the operational record of over 13,000 successful strikes represent objectives achieved. However, the strategy for the day after remains deeply unclear – and it is precisely this gap between tactical capability and strategic vision that Brzezinski most frequently warned about.

First conclusion: Washington must urgently formulate a post-conflict stabilisation strategy for Iran, one that is not limited to passively waiting for the regime to collapse and a pro-Western government to be installed. The experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that post-conflict power vacuums can be more destabilising than the regimes they replace. Brzezinski would have insisted that a viable political plan for ‘the day after’ is a sine qua non for any responsible military intervention – and its absence represents a fundamental strategic shortcoming of the current operation.

Second conclusion: managing strategic overstretch is urgent. The concentration of military resources in the Middle East weakens US deterrence in the Indo-Pacific – precisely the scenario that Brzezinski considered the most dangerous in the medium term. China, which perceives Washington as distracted and exhausted by the Iranian conflict, will be more tempted to test American resolve regarding Taiwan or the South China Sea. The reallocation of strategic bandwidth is a zero-sum problem that the Trump administration’s simultaneous fronts have made structurally acute.

Third conclusion: restoring diplomatic credibility is indispensable and cannot be achieved through military force alone. The attack launched whilst negotiations were ongoing has created a deficit of trust in US diplomatic commitments, which no number of airstrikes can repair. The resumption of negotiations in Islamabad must be accompanied by credible and verifiable guarantees – not just verbal assurances – if a lasting ceasefire and a post-conflict framework are to be achievable. Brzezinski’s formula for sustainable American leadership was ‘power plus legitimacy’: the current crisis has demonstrated that power without legitimacy is self-destructive.

## 8.2 Israel

In the short term, Israel stands to be the greatest tactical beneficiary of the 2026 conflict: its main strategic adversary — Iran — has been severely weakened; Hezbollah has been seriously eroded; and the US security umbrella appears solid. However, the Brzezinski perspective calls for caution in the face of the euphoria of tactical victory.

The first conclusion for Israel: military victory over Iran does not eliminate the structural causes of regional hostility towards the State of Israel. On the contrary, it could fuel a wave of radicalisation in the Arab and Islamic world that will generate new threats — possibly more diffuse, but no less dangerous. By early April 2026, operations in Lebanon had already resulted in over 1,700 civilian and military deaths, generating humanitarian consequences that will reverberate across the region for years to come. Brzezinski has consistently warned that Israel’s long-term security cannot be guaranteed by military force alone – it requires a political solution to the Palestinian issue, which the current conflict is further delaying.

Second conclusion: the growing dependence on US support creates a structural vulnerability. The joint US-Israel operations of 2025–2026 have strengthened the bilateral strategic partnership to an unprecedented level, but have also deepened Israel’s dependence on a US security umbrella, which may fluctuate with the internal political dynamics in Washington. Diversifying diplomatic partnerships — including exploring regional dialogue formats with moderate Arab states — is a strategic imperative that the current conflict, paradoxically, makes both more necessary and more difficult to pursue.

The third conclusion concerns the logic of cascading escalation. The reactivation of Houthi forces and the expansion of Israeli air operations into Lebanon suggest that military operations risk extending beyond the parameters initially calculated. Brzezinski would have emphasised that the logic of ‘domino escalation’ is far harder to control than military planners anticipate – a lesson that the current conflict is confirming in real time.

## 8.3 NATO

The US-Iran conflict exposes the North Atlantic Alliance to a major institutional dilemma: the involvement of a key member state (the United States) in a major conflict outside NATO’s traditional geographical area of responsibility, whilst the Russian threat on the Alliance’s eastern flank remains acute. On 11 April 2026, NATO, as an institution, is not directly involved in Iranian operations, but European member states are facing economic pressures due to rising energy costs and tacit demands for political support for US actions.

The first conclusion for NATO: the Alliance must urgently clarify whether and how its model of collective security applies in conflicts where a single dominant member takes the military initiative outside its traditional area of responsibility, without full consultation with the Alliance. Brzezinski supported NATO’s evolution from a territorial defensive alliance to a global security partnership, but insisted that this evolution requires genuine consensus – not forced adherence to unilateral decisions. The Alliance’s institutional credibility depends on its ability to articulate a coherent collective position, even when that position involves respectful disagreement with Washington.

The second conclusion concerns the opportunity for European strategic emancipation. The 2026 conflict demonstrates that Europe lacks the autonomous capacity to manage major security crises in its wider neighbourhood. Brzezinski viewed the transatlantic partnership as the “western pillar of the Eurasian balance” and argued that a strategically stronger Europe does not weaken NATO – but strengthens it. The current conflict should serve as a catalyst for accelerating the European project of strategic autonomy, including increased investment in defence, independent intelligence capabilities and a coherent EU security strategy for the wider Middle East.

The third conclusion concerns NATO’s eastern flank. The US focus on the Iranian conflict reduces, at least marginally, the resources and attention available for deterring Russia. Eastern

NATO member states – Romania, Poland, the Baltic states – have a vital interest in ensuring that US commitments to collective defence are not eroded by the absorption of strategic resources in the Middle East. This requires proactive management by the Alliance: reassurance measures, a rotational presence of forces, and an explicit reaffirmation of commitments under Article 5, without complacency regarding the possibility of Russian opportunism.

## **8.4 The European Union**

The European Union faces the immediate economic consequences of the conflict – rising energy prices, disruption to supply chains, inflationary pressures – and the challenge of defining a distinct political position on military action that it has not officially supported. This dual pressure precisely reflects the tension that Brzezinski identified in *The Choice*: the need to choose between solidarity with the American ally and credibility as an independent actor in foreign policy on the global stage.

The first conclusion for the EU: Brussels must adopt an active diplomatic stance in the ceasefire negotiations, including by activating its own channels of dialogue with Iran and regional mediators. A Europe that remains silent in the face of a major conflict in its wider neighbourhood — one that directly affects the energy security of Member States — is a Europe that is missing the opportunity to demonstrate its geopolitical maturity. The EU's diplomatic infrastructure, its economic weight and its normative authority provide it with tools which, if mobilised coherently and swiftly, could contribute significantly to finding a lasting solution.

The second conclusion concerns energy security. Disruptions to hydrocarbon flows from the Persian Gulf directly affect the European economy, providing further grounds for accelerating the energy transition and diversifying supply sources. Brzezinski emphasised that dependence on energy from unstable regions represents a structural vulnerability for Western powers. The 2026 crisis provides a strategic impetus – even if exploited politically – to advance infrastructure investment (development of the Caspian Sea corridor, expansion of the LNG terminal, acceleration of renewable energy), which would reduce European exposure to instability in the Middle East.

The third conclusion concerns the humanitarian dimension of migration. The conflict in Iran is generating displacement flows and humanitarian crises, with the potential to have a direct impact on Europe. The EU must develop, in collaboration with the UNHCR and Member States, contingency plans to manage potential migration waves from the affected area – not as a reactive emergency measure, but as a strategic anticipation of a crisis whose duration and intensity remain highly uncertain.

## **8.5 Romania**

Romania occupies a key geostrategic position in the context of the current conflict, both as a member state of NATO and the EU, with a significant US military presence on its territory, and as the Alliance's eastern anchor in the face of Russian pressure. In Brzezinski's logic of 'geopolitical pivots', Romania — situated at the intersection of the Black Sea, the Balkan region and NATO's eastern flank — is becoming a strategic hub of ever-increasing importance in a deteriorating global security environment.

The first conclusion for Romania: the current crisis in the Middle East and America's massive involvement in the conflict with Iran provide a further argument for accelerating investment in indigenous defence capabilities and for strengthening Romania's role as a reliable military host for NATO and US forces. Romania must capitalise on the increased American focus on the eastern flank to secure stronger commitments and additional military capabilities – precisely at a time when American resources are being stretched across multiple fronts simultaneously. A Romania that demonstrates strategic reliability becomes all the more valuable to Washington, not least during a period of overstretch.

The second conclusion relates to the energy and maritime dimensions. The port of Constanța and Romania's transit corridor for hydrocarbons are gaining increased importance in the context of disruptions to energy routes in the Persian Gulf. Romania has the opportunity to consolidate its role as an alternative energy hub and a logistics platform for the redistribution of hydrocarbon flows from Azerbaijan and other Caspian sources, thereby reducing European vulnerabilities in the event of a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. This is not merely an economic opportunity – it is a strategic contribution to the Alliance's resilience, positioning Romania as a partner with added value, not as a passive beneficiary of collective security.

The third conclusion concerns Black Sea security. The conflict in the Middle East must not distract attention from maritime threats in the Black Sea, where the Russian military presence and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine pose direct risks to the security of Romania's coastline and to freedom of navigation on this critical waterway. The Maritime Security Forum recommends increased vigilance and Romania's active participation in NATO's maritime monitoring and defence mechanisms in the Black Sea – mechanisms whose importance is, if anything, amplified, not diminished, by the current regional instability.

The fourth conclusion concerns Romania's regional diplomatic role. Romania has maintained diplomatic channels with actors in the Middle East over time and, through its dual membership of NATO and the EU, can contribute to multilateral stabilisation efforts. Brzezinski valued medium-sized states with solid Euro-Atlantic identities as mediators and facilitators in regional conflicts, arguing that they add value to multilateral diplomatic processes precisely because of their credibility as principled actors, without maximalist or hegemonic territorial ambitions. Romania's diplomatic tradition, its geographical position and its alliance credentials position it to play a constructive role in the architecture of post-conflict stabilisation – provided that Bucharest invests in the diplomatic capacity and political will necessary to exercise it consistently.

Beyond the particularities of each actor, the 2026 conflict reveals a deeper systemic trend: the transition from a relatively stable international order, dominated by rules and institutions, to an environment characterised by intensified strategic competition and increased volatility.

This transition does not imply the disappearance of international norms, but rather their selective challenge and differentiated application depending on the interests of the dominant actors. In this context, the ability to articulate and uphold a rules-based order becomes a central element of geopolitical competition, not merely a normative objective.

## 10. EPILOGUE: THE UNCHARTED PATH

Zbigniew Brzezinski passed away in May 2017, almost nine years before the escalation that culminated in Operation Epic Fury in 2026. And yet, his warnings seem to have been written to describe precisely this crisis. In his last major work, *Strategic Vision* (2012), he made a grim prediction: “If the US fails to adapt its foreign policy to the realities of an emerging multipolar world, it will witness the progressive erosion of its global supremacy – not through a dramatic confrontation, but through an accumulation of strategic mistakes.”<sup>12</sup>

The 2026 conflict has not, at least at the time of writing, brought down the international order. The fragile ceasefire currently being negotiated in Islamabad could offer a window for de-escalation. But it has exposed the fragility of a global security system built on military pillars, without commensurate diplomatic counterweights. It has demonstrated that the Strait of Hormuz — a 54-kilometre-wide passage — can function as a lever with which a regional state can destabilise the global economy. And it has confirmed that the ‘geopolitical pivots’ identified by Brzezinski nearly three decades ago remain, in essence, the same.

What has changed is the context: a United States less willing to bear the costs of multilateral hegemony, a Europe still seeking strategic maturity, a Russia engaged in its own military adventure, and a China advancing methodically without direct involvement in peripheral conflicts. The Eurasian chessboard is more complex than in 1997, but the fundamental rules of the game – identified by Brzezinski with remarkable acuity – remain unchanged: whoever controls Eurasia's energy infrastructure shapes the destiny of the world order.

Romania and its European and transatlantic allies have a fundamental interest in ensuring that this order remains one based on international law, multilateralism and the principles of freedom of navigation and trade — an order that Brzezinski described as the *sine qua non* of responsible American global leadership. By supporting this order — through investment in security, active diplomacy and the strengthening of multilateral institutions — Romania contributes, to the best of its ability, to building a stable Eurasian balance, which Brzezinski envisaged and which the 2026 conflict is dramatically jeopardising.

The unchosen path — sustained multilateral diplomacy, coercive economic pressure combined with credible diplomatic incentives, nuclear disarmament monitored by the IAEA with security guarantees, a regional security architecture incorporating Iran's legitimate interests — remains available, though more difficult to navigate following the military phase. The architecture of the post-war order will determine whether the 2026 conflict marks a moment of brutal but ultimately stabilising resolution, or the beginning of a prolonged period of fragmentation in the Middle East with global systemic consequences. Brzezinski's intellectual legacy offers no easy

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<sup>12</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012),

solutions, but it does provide an indispensable diagnosis: the measure of the great powers' wisdom is not their capacity to strike, but to build.

In this sense, the 2026 conflict can be interpreted not merely as a regional crisis, but as a turning point in the evolution of the international system. The choice between domination and leadership – as formulated by Brzezinski – is no longer a theoretical option, but an operational reality with immediate consequences.

The way in which the main actors manage the post-conflict phase will determine whether this crisis accelerates the fragmentation of the global order or lays the groundwork for a more stable reconfiguration. Ultimately, it is not the conflict itself, but the architecture of peace that follows it, that will define its historical significance.

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