US–Iran and Securing Maritime Chokepoints: The Hormuz Crisis

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Abstract

The Strait of Hormuz stands out as one of the most crucial maritime chokepoints in the world, acting as a vital passage for global oil, liquefied natural gas, and commercial shipping. Nestled between Iran and Oman, this strait has consistently played a key role in global energy security. However, persistent tensions between the United States and Iran have raised alarms regarding potential disruptions, military escalations, and legal uncertainties in this essential waterway. This paper delves into the broader strategic importance of global maritime chokepoints, focusing specifically on Hormuz and its role in international security and trade. By employing qualitative policy analysis and reviewing sources related to international law and energy security, the study evaluates the military, legal, and economic risks tied to the strait. The findings reveal that Hormuz is particularly vulnerable due to its narrow geography, the concentration of energy flows, and its susceptibility to coercive tactics from both state and non-state actors. Additionally, the paper highlights that any disruptions in the strait can have immediate repercussions on oil prices, shipping costs, and the stability of global supply chains. Ultimately, the study suggests that establishing a multilateral maritime security framework, bolstered by diplomatic efforts and clear legal guidelines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is the most effective way to mitigate risks and ensure freedom of navigation.

1. Introduction

Maritime chokepoints have historically played a major role in global trade, but very few hold as much strategic weight as the Strait of Hormuz. A single disturbance in this narrow waterway can affect oil prices, shipping routes, and security far beyond the Gulf region. The Strait of Hormuz lies between Iran and Oman, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is one of the world's busiest energy routes, carrying approximately one-fifth of global petroleum

liquids and a major share of liquefied natural gas (LNG), making it essential for energy security in Asia and other importing regions.

The central problem is that this strait has become inextricably linked to the rising geopolitical tension between the United States and Iran. Naval incidents, warnings to commercial ships, and competing claims over transit rights have rendered the area increasingly unstable. Even a short-term disruption can create severe pressure on global markets and regional security. While most discussions about Hormuz focus either on military tension or on oil supply in isolation, this paper provides a balanced view that integrates security, law, and economics to understand why the issue remains a persistent global concern.

To address these multifaceted challenges, this paper is guided by the following core research questions:

1. How do the strategic, legal, and economic dimensions of the US–Iran rivalry intersect to threaten the stability of the Strait of Hormuz?
2. What are the differing scholarly interpretations regarding the management of maritime chokepoints under international law?
3. Which alternative policy options offer the most effective framework for securing freedom of navigation and mitigating the impact of potential disruptions?

This paper argues that the Strait of Hormuz must be treated as both a strategic and legal flashpoint. The most practical way forward involves a synthesis of diplomacy, multilateral maritime cooperation, and stronger legal protections for free navigation under international law.

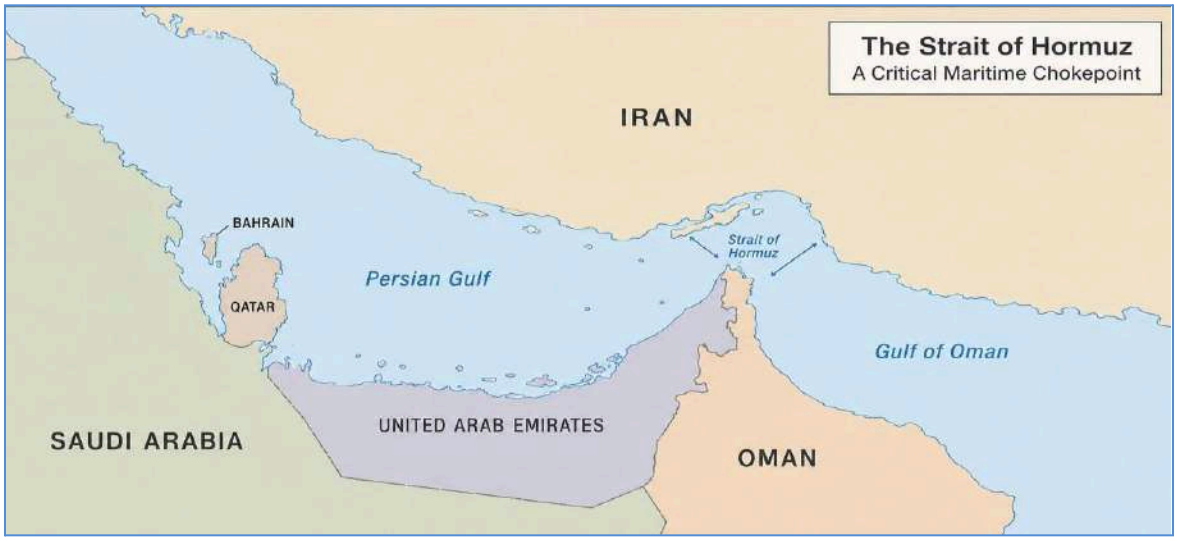


Figure 1 The Strait to Hormuz a Critical Chokepoint

2. Important Maritime Chokepoints in the World

Maritime chokepoints are narrow, localized channels on trade routes that are critical for global commerce and energy transit. Because roughly 80% of all global trade travels by sea, these physical bottlenecks concentrate massive volumes of shipping traffic, making them the ultimate pressure points for the global economy. Any disruption at these points causes immediate global impacts, including supply chain delays, price spikes, and broader economic crises. Monopoly or significant influence over these chokepoints can elevate a country's geopolitical standing. There are two primary types of maritime chokepoints: naturally formed straits and man-made canals.

Key global chokepoints include:

- Bosphorus: A natural strait and the only sea route from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. It primarily affects Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, facilitating the transit of oil, grain, coal, and containers.
- Strait of Hormuz: A natural strait through which 20–30% of global oil consumption passes. It is the only sea outlet for Persian Gulf oil, heavily impacting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Japan, China, India, and the US.
- Bab El-Mandeb: A natural strait acting as the gateway between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, critical for traffic heading to or from the Suez Canal.
- Strait of Malacca: A natural strait and the single most critical chokepoint in Asia, handling around 40% of global trade. It is the shortest route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
- Suez Canal: A man-made canal connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, vital for Asia-Europe trade.
- Panama Canal: A man-made canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, crucial for the Americas and global LNG and grain transit.

Figures 2 Approximate and may vary by yean Sources: EIA, UNCTAD, IMO, Lloyd's List, Clarkson Research Services.

3. Literature Review: Scholarly Interpretations of Maritime Security

The academic discourse surrounding the Strait of Hormuz and maritime security is largely divided between realist and liberal institutionalist interpretations. Realist scholars emphasize the primacy of state survival, hard power, and geopolitical competition. From this perspective, Iran's posturing in the Strait of Hormuz is viewed as a rational, defensive strategy to counter US hegemony and deter military intervention. Realists argue that control over the chokepoint provides Tehran with an asymmetric advantage, allowing it to project power despite conventional military inferiority.

Conversely, liberal institutionalists focus on the role of international law, economic interdependence, and multilateral cooperation. Scholars in this camp argue that the mutual economic ruin resulting from a closure of the Strait—affecting not only Western and Asian markets but also Iran's own oil-dependent economy—acts as a powerful deterrent. They emphasize the importance of regimes like UNCLOS in establishing normative frameworks that constrain state behavior. Rather than merely presenting the historical facts of the US-Iran rivalry, engaging with these differing interpretations reveals that the Hormuz crisis is not just a military standoff, but a fundamental clash between power politics and international legal norms.

4. Background and Strategic Importance of Hormuz

From all the Maritime checkpoints identified above, none of them carries greater geopolitical consequences. The Strait of Hormuz as a contested choke point originates from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). In 1984, Iraq aggravated the Tanker War by deploying an armed aircraft to attack an Iranian oil installation in Kharg Island(Strauss Center, n.d.-a). Although Iran retaliated by attacking Arab owned vessels, Iran refused to close the strait considering its one of the essential channels through which the revenue from oil is earned(Strauss Center, n.d.-a). This established the strait as a lever of pressure, not yet of closure. A significant military clash was Operation Praying Mantis, which occurred on April 18, 1988. Following the April 14, 1988, detonation of USS Samuel B. Roberts in Iranian mine waters, USA undertook a coordinated offensive that marked "the largest of five major U.S. Navy surface actions since World War II", destroying two Iranian surveillance stations, two ships, and severely disabling a third (NHHC, n.d.). On July 3, 1988, Iran Air Flight 655 was shot down by USS Vincennes, resulting in losing 290 lives(NHHC, n.d.), which served to exacerbate Iranian strategic grievance while failing to change their calculation for closing the strait. In June 2008, IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said that Iran would close the strait if attacked (Washington Institute, 2018). In December 2011, Iranian Vice President Rahimi asserted that Iran would close the strait if sanctions stopped exports. Later in June 2025, U.S. intel observed Iranian forces placing mines into tankers in the Persian Gulf, regarded as preparatory for a blockading maneuver though none were actually deployed (Reuters, 2025). This broke on February 28, 2026, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was assassinated in an American Israeli joint operation. The response was shocking: IRGC officials officially ordered the strait closed and tanker traffic plunged by over 90%; it proved a misguided assumption that Iran's economic dependency would cause them to hesitate following through (Special Eurasia, 2026).

Strategic Importance

The Strait's strategic importance is attributed to geography, which cannot be technologically re-engineered away. Its width measures at about 30 miles between Iran and Oman's Musandam Peninsula, through which commercial shipping funnels through 2 two mile wide lanes (Strauss Center, n.d.-b). Iran controls 7 of the strait's 8 largest islands and its chief naval base is in Bandar Abbas, at the chokepoint's entrance (Strauss Center, n.d.-b). , Iran doesn't need to extend its power outward; it can plant mines and intercept vessels from its sovereign territory and is within the defensive perimeters of all transit corridors. There isn't any significant alternative that matches the scale required. Saudi and UAE pipelines accommodate a fraction of the Strait's daily output. While Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and Iran themselves have no other export route than through the Strait. (IEA, 2026). Accordingly, disruption escalates quickly from an oil shock to a "wider inflation and growth shock"(Zamani,2026) materialised through freight, jet fuel and international price expectations, extending even to economies that don't import crude from the Persian Gulf.It is precisely this structural vulnerability that has made the Strait the defining arena of the US–Iran rivalry, a contest whose maritime dimensions are examined in the section that follows.

Figures 3 **Strategic Importance: Nautical Map**

5. US–Iran Rivalry in Maritime Security

Transitioning from the geographical realities to the geopolitical landscape, the rivalry between the United States and Iran in the maritime domain remains one of the most persistent security contests in the Middle East. Rooted in the 1980s Tanker War, this rivalry has evolved into a multidimensional struggle over chokepoints, energy flows, and regional influence.

Iran's geographic command over the Strait's northern shore provides enormous strategic leverage. The IRGC Navy (IRGCN) has invested heavily in asymmetric capabilities—fast-attack craft, anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, naval mines, and armed drones—designed to challenge superior US naval power in confined waters. Since 2016, Iran has adopted an explicitly offensive naval posture. Furthermore, this rivalry extends beyond direct encounters; Iran has systematically utilized proxy forces, such as the Houthi movement in Yemen, to extend its maritime reach into the Red Sea and the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, thereby stretching US and allied resources while maintaining plausible deniability.

In response, the United States has maintained a persistent naval presence via the 5th Fleet, deployed carrier strike groups during acute tensions, and formed multinational maritime security coalitions like Operation Prosperity Guardian. Yet, structural tensions remain unresolved, fueled by Iran's nuclear ambitions, US sanctions, and competing bids for regional dominance.

Figures 4 US–Iran Rivalry: Military Presence

6. Legal and International Law Perspective

The geopolitical rivalry is deeply intertwined with conflicting interpretations of international maritime law. The legal framework governing the Strait of Hormuz is primarily derived from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which recognizes the principle of 'transit passage' through international straits. Under this principle, vessels of all states are entitled to navigate through such waterways without unnecessary interference, balancing the sovereign rights of coastal states with the collective interest in maintaining freedom of navigation.

The legal controversy arises from Iran's interpretation of these rights. Iran, which has signed but not ratified UNCLOS, maintains that foreign military vessels operating near its territorial waters should be subject to restrictions based on sovereignty and national security, leaning towards the more restrictive concept of 'innocent passage.' Consequently, Iranian officials have periodically threatened to limit passage in response to external pressures.

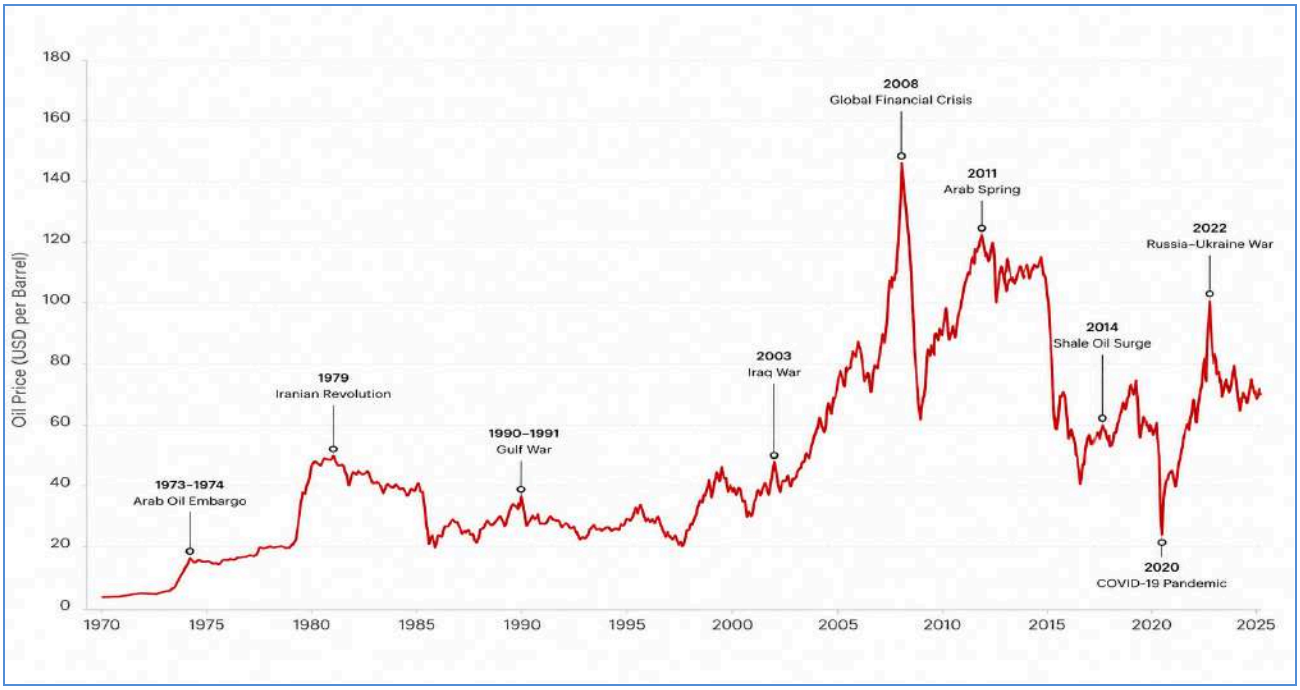
Conversely, the United States argues that transit passage through international straits constitutes customary international law and cannot be suspended unilaterally. This interpretation forms the basis of American Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). The Hormuz crisis thus highlights the intersection of law, security, and geopolitics. While legal frameworks alone cannot eliminate geopolitical rivalry, they remain essential mechanisms for regulating state behavior and preventing escalation.

7. Economic and Energy Security Impact

The legal and military vulnerabilities of the Strait directly translate into profound economic risks. The Strait of Hormuz serves as the connecting link between the energy-hungry giants of Asia and the oil-led economies of the Middle East. The dependence on this route holds cascading impacts across global sectors, including agriculture, pharmaceuticals, technology, manufacturing, aviation, and shipping.

Empirical data from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) underscores the severity of a potential closure. The IMF has noted that a de facto closure of the Strait would produce the largest disruption to global oil markets in history, leading to higher energy prices, inflation expectations, and tighter financial conditions. In Saudi Arabia, where oil accounts for 60–70% of government revenue, export disruptions would be devastating. Similarly, Iraq exports over 3 million barrels of oil per day through these vulnerable routes.

Nearly 80% of the oil passing through the strait is consumed in Asia. Countries like India, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines face widening trade deficits and currency pressure due to higher fuel import costs during periods of disruption. Recent empirical reports estimate that a full closure could result in global oil supply losses exceeding 10 million barrels per day, triggering a wider inflation and growth shock that extends even to economies that do not directly import crude from the Persian Gulf.



Figures-5 Economic Impact: Oil Price Graph

8. Policy Options and Strategic Responses

The Strait of Hormuz crisis demands a layered policy architecture. To move beyond descriptive analysis, it is essential to comparatively evaluate the effectiveness of alternative policy options.

8.1 Multilateral Maritime Security Framework

Establishing a permanent, UN-mandated multilateral maritime security coalition offers greater legal legitimacy than US-led initiatives like Operation Prosperity Guardian. While US-led coalitions possess superior military capabilities, they often deter participation from states unwilling to align against Iran. A genuinely international framework, including Asian importers, would be more effective in isolating aggressive actors diplomatically while securing the waterway.

8.2 Diplomatic De-escalation and Nuclear Negotiations

Compared to military deterrence, reviving structured diplomatic negotiations remains the most cost-effective and durable long-term strategy. Back-channel engagement through neutral intermediaries (e.g., Oman) addresses the root causes of the rivalry—namely, sanctions and nuclear proliferation—rather than merely treating the symptoms at sea.

8.3 Energy Diversification and Alternative Infrastructure

Investing in alternative shipping infrastructure, such as the East-West Pipeline in Saudi Arabia and the Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline, provides partial bypass capacity. However, comparatively, these pipelines currently handle only a fraction of Hormuz's daily throughput and are themselves vulnerable to regional instability. Therefore, while pipeline expansion is

necessary, it is less immediately effective than accelerating domestic renewable energy transitions and expanding Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs) in importing nations like India and China.

8.4 Legal Codification Under UNCLOS

Clarifying the legal ambiguity surrounding transit passage through a UN General Assembly resolution would strengthen the normative barrier against closure. While legally binding, its practical effectiveness relies heavily on the willingness of the international community to enforce it, making it a necessary but insufficient option on its own.

Figures-6 Policy Options: Alternative Pipeline Map

9. Recommendations

Based on the comparative evaluation of policy options and supported by international policy reports, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. Prioritize Diplomatic Engagement: The US and its allies must leverage multilateral frameworks to facilitate dialogue with Iran. Supported by IMF assessments of Iran's severe economic pressures, the US should signal a willingness to ease specific sanctions in exchange for verifiable commitments to freedom of navigation and nuclear compliance.
2. Reinforce the Legal Framework: Nations heavily reliant on the Strait, particularly China and India, must publicly affirm their support for the customary nature of transit passage under UNCLOS. Consistent state practice is required to isolate restrictive legal interpretations.
3. Calibrate Naval Presence: A robust, multilateral naval presence should be maintained, focusing strictly on defensive escort operations and intelligence sharing rather than aggressive FONOPs that risk miscalculation.
4. Accelerate Energy Diversification: In alignment with IEA recommendations, importing nations must expand their Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs) to a minimum of 90 days of net imports.

Furthermore, investments in alternative pipelines and renewable energy infrastructure must be fast-tracked to reduce the absolute geopolitical leverage of the chokepoint.

10. Conclusion

The enduring tensions in the Strait of Hormuz serve as a potent reminder of the fragility of global maritime security. This paper has demonstrated that the Strait is not merely a geographical bottleneck, but a complex nexus where international law, national sovereignty, and global economic imperatives converge.

The rivalry between the US and Iran, exacerbated by divergent interpretations of UNCLOS, creates a persistent legal and strategic labyrinth.

Moving forward, sustainable stability cannot be achieved through military deterrence alone. It requires a synthesis of renewed diplomatic engagement, a collective commitment to upholding international maritime law, and aggressive strategies for energy diversification. The security of this vital waterway is a shared global responsibility; only through concerted international cooperation can the unimpeded flow of commerce and the stability of the international order be assured.

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