

Chokepoint of Empires: The Strategic History of Conflict and Trade in the Strait of Hormuz

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June 22, 2025

The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway linking the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, has long been one of the most strategically vital corridors in the world. For over four thousand years, it has served as a maritime crossroads—first for ancient traders navigating between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, and later for empires, navies, and multinational corporations. Its significance has only grown with the global dependence on Persian Gulf oil and gas exports, much of which must pass through this slender channel. This paper examines the strait’s enduring dual identity: a commercial lifeline facilitating the exchange of goods, energy, and ideas, and a geopolitical fault line repeatedly shaken by conflict, colonial ambition, and great power rivalry. From ancient trade routes and medieval Islamic ports to European colonial control, Cold War military deployments, and 21st-century asymmetric threats, the Strait of Hormuz remains a focal point of global attention. Understanding its history is essential to anticipating its future—and the broader implications for international law, energy markets, and security.

Keywords: Strait of Hormuz, Persian Gulf, maritime trade, energy security, oil transit, geopolitics, naval conflict, chokepoint, Iran, tanker war, British Empire, international law, asymmetric warfare, Middle East, global energy markets. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

Abstract

The Strait of Hormuz has long stood as one of the most strategically significant waterways in human history, serving as both a conduit of commerce and a flashpoint for conflict. This paper explores the historical continuity of the strait's importance, tracing its role from the maritime networks of the ancient world through to the oil-driven geopolitics of the 21st century. From the early trade routes linking Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, to Portuguese and British colonial control, and on to modern U.S.–Iranian tensions, the Strait of Hormuz has consistently mirrored the broader power struggles of its time. Its narrow geography—linking the Persian Gulf to the open seas—has magnified its strategic value, rendering it a critical chokepoint through which nearly a third of the world's seaborne oil continues to flow. The paper examines not only the economic and logistical dimensions of this significance but also the military confrontations, shutdown threats, and diplomatic crises that have surrounded it. Through a chronological analysis of these events, the study reveals how this maritime corridor has functioned as both an engine of global trade and a barometer of regional instability.

1. Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime passage approximately 21 miles wide at its narrowest point, lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, flanked by Iran to the north and the United Arab Emirates and Oman to the south. Its geographical position makes it one of the most critical chokepoints in global trade, especially for energy commodities. Despite its modest width, the strait serves as the principal maritime route for nearly all seaborne exports from the oil-rich nations of the Persian Gulf. As of recent decades, roughly 20–25% of the world's oil supply, and a significant portion of liquefied natural gas (LNG), passes through this channel daily.

The strait's geography amplifies its strategic significance. It serves as the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean, making it an unavoidable

bottleneck for countries dependent on Gulf energy exports, such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, and many European nations. Its narrowness also makes it particularly vulnerable to military blockades, asymmetric naval tactics, and the threat of mining or sabotage—factors that have repeatedly raised international concern during periods of regional instability.

The Strait of Hormuz has consistently occupied a dual role in world affairs: as both a vital commercial lifeline and a frequent site of military tension. Historically, the strait has enabled the flourishing of regional trade networks linking the civilizations of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa. At the same time, its control has often been contested by imperial powers, colonial navies, and modern nation-states seeking to assert dominance over one of the world's most consequential transit routes.

In the modern era, the strait's importance has only intensified with the rise of oil as a global commodity and the resulting geopolitical entanglements in the Middle East. Any disruption—whether through direct conflict, political brinkmanship, or piracy—has the potential to shock global energy markets and destabilize international relations. This paper examines the Strait of Hormuz as a persistent axis of global strategy, one where commerce and conflict have intersected across thousands of years. It aims to show how this narrow waterway has evolved into a central theater of both economic interdependence and political confrontation.

2. Antiquity and Early Maritime Trade

Long before oil tankers and modern navies came to define the Strait of Hormuz, it served as a vital artery in the earliest known systems of long-distance maritime trade. Situated at the southeastern edge of the Persian Gulf, the strait acted as a natural gateway between the resource-rich civilizations of Mesopotamia and the vast markets of the Indus Valley and beyond. Its narrow waters were traversed by seafarers transporting precious goods, technologies, and cultural knowledge in a period when maritime capabilities were still rudimentary by modern standards.

Yet even in this early context, the Strait of Hormuz functioned as a strategic funnel through which much of the commerce of the ancient Near East flowed.

Mesopotamian–Indus Valley Maritime Routes

As early as the third millennium BCE, the Sumerians of Mesopotamia maintained robust maritime trade with the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley.

Archaeological evidence—including Indus seals found in Mesopotamia and Mesopotamian artifacts unearthed in the Indus region—attests to a well-established maritime exchange that passed through the lower Persian Gulf and likely funneled through the Strait of Hormuz. Ports such as Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain) and Magan (associated with parts of present-day Oman and the UAE) acted as intermediaries and staging points for this trade.

Goods traded through this corridor included timber, ivory, lapis lazuli, copper, carnelian, and other luxury commodities. These materials often originated far inland, yet reached the sea through sophisticated logistics networks that relied on the Strait of Hormuz as a central conduit. The strategic control of these maritime routes was of vital interest to early empires, not only for economic gain but also for the symbolic demonstration of power across great distances.

Achaemenid Naval Control and Early Imperial Strategies

The rise of the Achaemenid Empire in the 6th century BCE marked the first concerted effort by a major imperial power to integrate the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz into a broader geopolitical strategy. Cyrus the Great and his successors understood the importance of sea power and coastal administration in controlling both trade and military movement. The Achaemenid navy, though often overshadowed by its land-based infrastructure like the Royal Road, played a significant role in maintaining influence over maritime commerce.

Under Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE), naval exploration extended into the Indian Ocean, and Persian fleets operated throughout the Gulf region. The Achaemenid Empire managed to secure the strait's approaches by forming alliances or asserting dominance over coastal peoples, ensuring a steady flow of tribute and trade goods. While the strait was not militarized in the modern sense, its role in

imperial logistics and economic integration became increasingly clear during this era.

Hellenistic and Roman-Era Trade Dynamics

Following Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia in the 4th century BCE, the Hellenistic successors—the Seleucid Empire in particular—sought to control and exploit the maritime routes through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The Greeks inherited and expanded upon Persian administrative models, establishing ports and fortifications along the Gulf's northern and southern coasts.

Trade during this period increasingly connected the Mediterranean world with India, Arabia, and East Africa. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek maritime guide dating to the 1st century CE, describes shipping routes that almost certainly passed through the Strait of Hormuz, underscoring its significance in the east-west flow of goods. Spices, incense, textiles, and precious stones flowed westward, while Roman glassware, wine, and silver made their way east.

The Roman Empire maintained strong economic interests in these eastern trade networks, even though it lacked direct political control over the region. The Parthian and later Sassanid Persian empires, both adversaries of Rome, often mediated this commerce. The Strait of Hormuz, therefore, became not just a commercial bottleneck but also a political one—a zone of indirect confrontation and economic diplomacy between rival imperial systems.

In sum, the Strait of Hormuz in antiquity was a critical link in the expanding chain of maritime civilizations. From early proto-globalization in the Bronze Age to the sophisticated imperial strategies of Persia, Greece, and Rome, the strait served as a vital intersection where trade, power, and geography converged. Its enduring significance was already visible, even in the age of wooden ships and sail-driven commerce.

3. Islamic Expansion and Medieval Trade Dominance

With the rise of Islam in the 7th century CE, the dynamics of trade and power in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz shifted significantly. The Islamic conquests rapidly displaced both the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, and a new political and economic order emerged that placed the Gulf region—and the Strait of Hormuz in particular—at the heart of an expanding Islamic world system. Under successive Islamic caliphates, especially during the Abbasid period, the Persian Gulf flourished as a center of maritime commerce, cultural exchange, and naval organization. The Strait of Hormuz continued to play a vital role as the primary sea route linking the heart of the Islamic world with India, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and even China.

Abbasid Trade and Naval Control in the Persian Gulf

The Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), with its capital in Baghdad near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, maintained strong economic and strategic interests in the Persian Gulf. Baghdad's proximity to the Gulf gave the Abbasids direct access to international maritime trade via the Strait of Hormuz. The caliphate invested in the development of coastal cities, harbors, and shipbuilding facilities to support their growing merchant fleets and naval patrols.

During this period, the Abbasids established a well-coordinated trade network that extended from Basra and Siraf (a key Persian port) through the Strait of Hormuz and onward to India and China. The Indian Ocean trade routes—sometimes referred to as the “maritime silk road”—carried spices, silk, ceramics, perfumes, pearls, and precious metals. The Strait of Hormuz functioned as a mandatory passage for these goods, and control over its waters was essential to maintaining the empire's economic vitality.

Although the Abbasid navy was not as formidable as its land-based armies, it played a critical role in defending trade convoys, suppressing piracy, and projecting power along the coastlines. Naval patrols ensured the security of shipping lanes, and ports along both the Arabian and Persian shores prospered under the protective umbrella of the caliphate.

Rise of Hormuz as a Commercial Hub

By the 10th century, the island city of Hormuz—located near the modern Iranian coast—began to emerge as a dominant commercial center. Originally situated on the mainland, the city was moved to the nearby island of Jarun (now known as Hormuz Island) in the 13th century, primarily for defensive purposes. Its relocation allowed it to take advantage of the narrowness of the Strait, where it could monitor and control maritime traffic while avoiding raids by nomadic and tribal groups.

Under the rule of the local Hormuzid dynasty, the city of Hormuz grew wealthy and powerful, eventually becoming one of the most prosperous ports in the Islamic world. Merchants from as far as China, India, East Africa, and the Mediterranean frequented its bustling markets. Hormuz became known not only for its strategic location but also for its cosmopolitan culture, where Arab, Persian, Indian, and African influences blended together. It was described by contemporaries such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta as a city of immense wealth and vibrant international exchange.

Hormuz functioned as a commercial toll station for all vessels passing through the strait. It collected customs duties and maintained a fleet of ships to enforce its economic policies. Its prosperity was a direct result of its ability to extract value from the convergence of trade routes at the Strait of Hormuz—solidifying its role as both a commercial hub and a geopolitical gatekeeper.

Role of Regional Naval Powers

While the Abbasid Caliphate and the Hormuzid dynasty exerted significant influence, other regional powers also played key roles in the maritime dynamics of the strait. Various Persian and Arab emirs maintained coastal fortresses and fleets that could support or threaten the flow of trade, depending on their political alignments and ambitions.

The Buyid dynasty (10th–11th centuries) and later the Seljuk Turks and the Khwarazmian Empire engaged in periodic struggles over control of Gulf ports and the trade revenues they generated. Similarly, the Indian Chola dynasty launched

naval expeditions into the Arabian Sea during the 11th century, highlighting the increasingly interconnected nature of maritime politics in the region.

By the late medieval period, the Strait of Hormuz had become a highly contested maritime corridor, one in which city-states, empires, and naval coalitions competed for influence. While no single power maintained permanent control over the entire region, a balance of interests—enforced by trade agreements, military alliances, and religious cohesion within the broader Islamic world—helped ensure the continued flow of commerce through the strait.

In sum, the Islamic expansion into the Persian Gulf and the rise of medieval Islamic maritime networks transformed the Strait of Hormuz into a thriving axis of global trade. The combination of state-sponsored naval activity, mercantile enterprise, and local dynastic governance created a complex and enduring system in which the Strait served both as a channel for economic growth and as a strategic chessboard for regional influence.

4. European Colonial Intervention and Control (1500–1800)

The arrival of European maritime powers in the Indian Ocean in the early 16th century marked a decisive turning point for the strategic control of the Strait of Hormuz. For over a millennium, Islamic empires and regional dynasties had dominated the Persian Gulf and its vital maritime routes, with the Strait functioning as a largely Islamic-controlled commercial gateway. However, the rise of European naval empires—beginning with the Portuguese and followed by the Dutch and British—ushered in an era of foreign intervention, fortified occupation, and economic realignment. The Strait of Hormuz, once integrated into the Islamic world system, became a focal point of imperial rivalry as Western powers sought to dominate global trade through superior naval technology and force projection.

Portuguese Conquest and Fortification of Hormuz

In 1507, the Portuguese under Afonso de Albuquerque launched a campaign to secure control over the Strait of Hormuz. Their strategic objective was clear: to monopolize the lucrative trade routes between Europe and the East by controlling

key maritime chokepoints. The island of Hormuz, which had by then become a thriving commercial center, was seen as the ideal base from which to enforce this maritime empire.

After a series of naval engagements and political negotiations, the Portuguese succeeded in capturing Hormuz and establishing a garrison. Over the following decades, they constructed an elaborate fortress—Fort of Our Lady of the Conception—designed to withstand both naval assault and internal rebellion. The fortress served as the epicenter of Portuguese influence in the region, allowing them to dominate the maritime traffic passing through the strait.

From Hormuz, the Portuguese imposed customs duties on all passing ships and enforced trade restrictions that redirected commerce to Portuguese-controlled ports in Goa and other parts of their Indian Ocean empire. This shift disrupted traditional Islamic trade networks and significantly altered the flow of goods through the region. Their presence also introduced a more militarized form of maritime governance, with patrols, inspections, and periodic enforcement actions designed to secure Portuguese trade dominance.

Anglo-Persian Expulsion of Portuguese Forces

Portuguese control of the Strait of Hormuz lasted for over a century but eventually became unsustainable due to growing resistance from regional powers and the emergence of rival European interests. By the early 17th century, the Safavid Empire under Shah Abbas I was seeking to reassert control over Persian coastal territories and expel foreign interlopers from critical trade zones.

In 1622, an Anglo-Persian alliance mounted a coordinated military operation to oust the Portuguese from Hormuz. The English East India Company, eager to undermine Portuguese dominance and expand its own influence in the Gulf, provided naval support while the Safavid army attacked by land. The campaign was successful, and the Portuguese were forced to surrender the island.

Following their expulsion, the island of Hormuz was abandoned in favor of nearby Bandar Abbas, which became the new commercial and administrative center under Persian control. Although the Safavids regained territorial authority, the

involvement of the British marked the beginning of a long and deepening engagement between European powers and the Persian Gulf—a trend that would grow more pronounced in the coming centuries.

Shifts in Trade Regulation Under British and Dutch Influence

The decline of Portuguese influence opened the door to other European powers, notably the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the British East India Company (EIC). Both entities were chartered corporate monopolies with immense resources, private armies, and global ambitions. Although the Dutch initially gained a stronger foothold in Southeast Asia, the British gradually came to dominate the maritime routes leading through the Strait of Hormuz.

Unlike the Portuguese, who relied heavily on military conquest and fortification, the Dutch and British often employed a combination of naval presence, commercial treaties, and strategic alliances with local rulers. They sought to protect their trade routes from piracy and rival powers while gaining privileged access to regional commodities such as spices, silk, textiles, and pearls.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, British naval patrols increasingly monitored the Strait of Hormuz, not to impose universal tariffs as the Portuguese had done, but to secure safe passage for British-flagged vessels. Their control of the seas allowed them to protect merchant shipping, suppress local piracy, and exert diplomatic pressure on Gulf sheikhdoms. By the late 18th century, the British had become the dominant European naval power in the region, setting the stage for the “Pax Britannica” that would define the Gulf throughout the 19th century.

This period also witnessed the gradual transition of the Strait of Hormuz from a contested commercial corridor between empires to a semi-regulated passage governed by European maritime law and colonial policy. The transformation had lasting effects on the Gulf’s political landscape, weakening traditional port cities and empires while tethering regional economies to the global trade networks emerging under European colonial rule.

In summary, the period from 1500 to 1800 was characterized by the forceful entrance of European powers into the geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz. The

Portuguese brought a militarized model of control, the Anglo-Persian alliance removed them, and the subsequent dominance of the Dutch and British reshaped the political and commercial realities of the region. What had once been an Islamic maritime hub was now firmly enmeshed in the currents of European imperial ambition.

5. The British Empire and 19th-Century Maritime Stability

The 19th century witnessed the consolidation of British power in the Persian Gulf and, by extension, the Strait of Hormuz. Following centuries of volatile regional rivalries, shifting imperial influence, and intermittent warfare, the British gradually established a system of relative maritime stability. Their interest in the region was not rooted in colonial settlement, but in the protection of trade routes—especially those linking Britain to its most prized imperial possession, India. Through a series of maritime treaties, anti-piracy campaigns, and political agreements with local rulers, the British imposed a new geopolitical order that prioritized safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz and the wider Gulf.

Suppression of Piracy and Imposition of Maritime Treaties

In the early 19th century, the British East India Company and the Royal Navy intensified their efforts to eliminate what they defined as piracy in the Persian Gulf. Much of the resistance they encountered came from the Qawasim (or Al Qasimi), a powerful maritime tribal confederation based in Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah, whose fleets had grown formidable and were viewed by the British as a serious threat to commercial shipping.

In 1819, the British launched a major naval expedition against the Qawasim, destroying their strongholds and fleets in a campaign that marked the beginning of sustained British military presence in the Gulf. The following year, in 1820, the British signed the General Maritime Treaty with several local rulers along the southern Gulf coast. This treaty committed them to refrain from piracy and established British oversight over regional maritime conduct.

Subsequent treaties in 1835 and 1853 led to what became known as the Perpetual Maritime Truce, which effectively outlawed maritime warfare among Gulf rulers and established a British-enforced peace across the shipping lanes. Although framed as anti-piracy agreements, these treaties in practice amounted to a framework of imperial maritime governance that prioritized uninterrupted trade and navigation.

The Trucial States and British Naval Dominance

Through these treaties, Britain formalized a protectorate-like relationship with a collection of coastal sheikhdoms that would later become known as the Trucial States—modern-day United Arab Emirates. Although Britain did not claim formal sovereignty, it exercised near-total control over the foreign policy and external affairs of these states, guaranteeing their internal autonomy in exchange for exclusive strategic access and regional loyalty.

The Royal Navy maintained a permanent presence in the Gulf, patrolling the Strait of Hormuz and anchoring key ships in Bahrain and other Gulf ports. The British political resident—headquartered in Bushire (on the Iranian coast)—oversaw diplomatic relations, trade issues, and dispute resolution among the Trucial States and their neighbors. The result was a period of relative stability in Gulf maritime affairs, even as internal tribal and sectarian conflicts persisted inland.

British naval dominance ensured the free flow of commercial shipping, much of it destined for or originating from India. The Strait of Hormuz became a heavily monitored but peacefully traversed corridor, safeguarded not by fortifications or militarized checkpoints, but by diplomatic agreements backed by overwhelming British sea power.

Trade Normalization and the Geopolitical Status Quo

By mid-century, the British had effectively created a maritime order in the Gulf that served their imperial and commercial interests. Trade through the Strait of Hormuz flourished under this enforced stability. Regional port cities such as Muscat, Basra, and Bandar Abbas became key nodes in the Anglo-Indian

commercial network, facilitating the movement of textiles, spices, pearls, weapons, and other goods.

Pearl diving emerged as a major industry among the Trucial States during this period, and its prosperity was closely linked to the security of maritime routes ensured by British patrols. Indian merchants, many of them from Bombay and Gujarat, established commercial outposts in Gulf cities, further integrating the region into Britain's colonial economy.

Despite the growing influence of rival powers such as the Ottoman Empire, Persia (Qajar dynasty), and later Russia, the geopolitical status quo in the Gulf remained largely intact due to Britain's overwhelming naval superiority and diplomatic leverage. The Strait of Hormuz, though small in scale, was secured as a critical artery of British imperial logistics.

In this period, the British achieved what earlier empires had only temporarily grasped: sustained control over the Strait of Hormuz not through direct colonization, but through a web of treaties, protectorates, and regional naval dominance. The result was a long-lasting, if asymmetrical, maritime peace that shaped the strategic reality of the Gulf well into the 20th century.

6. The 20th Century: Oil, War, and Escalating Strategic Value

The 20th century transformed the Strait of Hormuz from a regional maritime corridor into a globally recognized strategic chokepoint. The convergence of three critical developments—the discovery of oil, the global scale of modern warfare, and the geopolitical realignments of the Cold War and post-colonial era—elevated the strait's significance to an unprecedented level. Control over the Strait of Hormuz became inextricably linked to the control of energy flows, military security, and political leverage. The result was a century in which the strait remained under constant strategic scrutiny, punctuated by direct conflict and international military intervention.

Impact of Oil Discovery and Early Nationalization Conflicts

The discovery of oil in the early 20th century fundamentally altered the economic and strategic landscape of the Persian Gulf. In 1908, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later BP) struck oil in Masjed Soleiman in southwest Iran. This marked the beginning of large-scale petroleum extraction in the region and shifted the focus of global powers toward securing access to energy resources.

As oil exploration and production expanded to Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Trucial States, the Strait of Hormuz acquired immense importance as the narrow channel through which crude oil had to pass to reach global markets. Tankers grew in size and number, and by mid-century, the majority of oil from the Persian Gulf transited through the strait.

The issue of resource sovereignty emerged prominently in the 1950s when Iran, under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. This action provoked a crisis involving Britain and the United States, culminating in a CIA- and MI6-backed coup in 1953 that removed Mossadegh from power. Although the Strait of Hormuz was not directly closed during this episode, the nationalization conflict highlighted the geopolitical risks associated with energy transit through the region and the potential for political instability to threaten maritime security.

Strategic Significance During World Wars

During World War I, the British secured vital oil infrastructure and protected sea lanes in the Persian Gulf. The war underscored the importance of oil as a military resource, prompting Britain to increase its naval presence around the Strait of Hormuz to safeguard shipping routes.

World War II further amplified the strategic value of the strait. Allied forces relied heavily on oil from the Middle East, and the British maintained a robust naval presence in the Indian Ocean to protect the flow of fuel from the Gulf. Although the Axis powers did not directly threaten the Strait of Hormuz, German naval activity in the Indian Ocean, along with fears of a Japanese advance, made the protection of this waterway a high priority for the Allies.

The experience of the World Wars established a precedent for treating the Strait of Hormuz as a critical military and logistical asset. It also reinforced the need for Western powers to maintain a long-term naval presence in the Gulf, which would become formalized during the Cold War period.

Iran-Iraq War and the Tanker War

The strategic centrality of the Strait of Hormuz reached new levels during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), particularly during the latter stages of the conflict in what became known as the Tanker War. Both nations, unable to decisively defeat each other on land, turned to targeting oil infrastructure and commercial shipping in a bid to undermine each other's economies and disrupt global support.

Beginning in 1984, Iran and Iraq began attacking oil tankers and merchant vessels transiting the Persian Gulf. Iraq, with Western backing, used missiles and aircraft to target ships near Iranian waters. Iran retaliated by targeting ships associated with Iraq's allies, including Kuwaiti and Saudi vessels, and began laying naval mines in the Gulf, threatening passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

This period saw hundreds of vessels attacked, sunk, or damaged, creating significant volatility in global oil markets. Insurance premiums soared, and the potential for a major disruption of energy supplies prompted global concern.

Operation Earnest Will and U.S. Military Engagement

In response to Kuwait's request for protection, the United States launched Operation Earnest Will (1987–1988), the largest naval convoy operation since World War II. Under the operation, Kuwaiti oil tankers were temporarily reflagged under the U.S. flag, allowing them to be escorted by the U.S. Navy. This direct military engagement marked a turning point: the formal entry of the United States into Persian Gulf maritime security as a permanent actor.

As part of the operation, the U.S. Navy deployed warships to escort tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, monitored Iranian naval activity, and engaged in retaliatory operations when American ships were attacked. The most notable incident occurred in April 1988, when the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* struck an Iranian

mine, prompting Operation Praying Mantis, in which U.S. forces destroyed multiple Iranian naval vessels and oil platforms.

Another major incident occurred in July 1988 when the USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian passenger plane, killing all 290 people on board. This tragedy further inflamed tensions and illustrated the risks of miscalculation in the congested waters of the strait.

By the end of the Tanker War, the Strait of Hormuz had become one of the most militarized maritime zones in the world. The United States established a de facto role as the guarantor of maritime security in the Gulf, a role it would retain into the 21st century through the establishment of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.

In summary, the 20th century saw the transformation of the Strait of Hormuz from a vital commercial waterway into a contested and often dangerous chokepoint at the center of global energy geopolitics. The discovery of oil, the pressures of world wars, and the brutal realities of regional conflict converged to make the strait a focal point of both economic interdependence and military confrontation.

7. The 21st Century: Perpetual Tension and Asymmetric Threats

As the world entered the 21st century, the strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz only intensified, but the nature of threats evolved. While 20th-century conflicts had largely involved conventional naval and air power, the new century brought with it asymmetric warfare, proxy conflicts, and a series of political crises rooted in broader regional and global tensions—especially those involving Iran, the United States, and their respective allies. The Strait of Hormuz, still handling over 20% of the world's seaborne oil, remained a critical barometer of geopolitical risk, and each new flashpoint reverberated through energy markets and security policy.

Iran's Threats of Closure and Naval Skirmishes

Iran has frequently used the threat of closing the Strait of Hormuz as a political lever in response to Western sanctions and diplomatic pressure. The notion of

closure, even if not fully realized, carries immense weight due to the potential global economic fallout. Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that if Iran is prevented from exporting its oil, no other Gulf country will be able to do so either.

The first major 21st-century flare occurred in 2008, when Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) speedboats conducted provocative maneuvers near U.S. naval vessels in the Strait. These encounters, often involving fast-attack craft, drones, and maritime harassment tactics, became a recurring pattern. Rather than deploying a conventional navy to challenge U.S. dominance, Iran focused on developing swarm tactics, mine-laying capabilities, and missile systems deployed from its coastline and islands like Qeshm and Abu Musa.

Although the strait was never physically closed, these actions highlighted Iran's ability to create strategic ambiguity and raise the cost of securing maritime passage through relatively low-cost, high-impact threats. The result was a form of asymmetric deterrence that relied on the perception of risk rather than direct military confrontation.

Nuclear Negotiations and Their Impact on Shipping

The Iranian nuclear program became the central issue shaping Gulf maritime security in the 2010s. As Iran advanced its uranium enrichment capabilities, Western powers imposed a series of escalating sanctions aimed at curbing its nuclear ambitions. These sanctions directly affected Iranian oil exports and heightened tensions surrounding the Strait of Hormuz.

In 2011–2012, during the height of sanctions under the Obama administration and the European Union's oil embargo on Iran, Iranian officials once again threatened to close the strait. In response, the United States and its allies dramatically increased their naval presence in the region. This led to Operation Sentinel, a multinational effort to maintain the freedom of navigation in the Gulf and deter Iranian aggression.

Despite intense rhetoric and periodic incidents, Iran never fully enacted a closure, recognizing that doing so would provoke a military response and potentially isolate it diplomatically. However, shipping companies and energy markets

remained highly sensitive to any signs of tension, with insurance premiums and freight rates often spiking during periods of verbal escalation or isolated attacks.

2019 Tanker Incidents and International Response

A significant escalation occurred in mid-2019, when a series of attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz raised global alarm. Between May and June of that year, four ships were damaged by underwater explosives off the coast of the UAE, and two others—one Japanese and one Norwegian—were struck in the Gulf of Oman. The United States and its allies blamed Iran for the incidents, citing evidence of IRGC involvement, though Tehran denied responsibility.

In retaliation for the British seizure of an Iranian tanker near Gibraltar suspected of violating EU sanctions on Syria, Iran's IRGC seized the British-flagged oil tanker *Stena Impero* in July 2019 as it transited the Strait. The incident further inflamed tensions and raised the prospect of open confrontation between Western naval forces and Iran.

These events prompted the formation of a U.S.-led coalition of naval forces, including the UK, Australia, and several Gulf states, tasked with providing security escorts and monitoring regional waters. The situation stabilized only after intense diplomatic engagement and backchannel communication, underscoring how easily the strait could become the epicenter of a broader crisis.

Naval Coalitions and the Escalation of Proxy Warfare

The pattern of instability in the Strait of Hormuz has increasingly become tied to regional proxy conflicts—particularly the rivalry between Iran and its regional adversaries, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. As Iran's conventional military reach remains limited, its influence is often projected through allied non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shi'a militias in Iraq. While these groups do not operate directly in the Strait, their actions—such as Houthi drone and missile attacks on Gulf oil infrastructure—impact perceptions of risk across the region, including maritime corridors.

The establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian in the 2020s—a follow-up to Operation Sentinel—has institutionalized a multilateral naval presence in the region. The U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, continues to conduct regular patrols, surveillance, and joint exercises with allied navies. Emerging technologies, including unmanned surface vessels and AI-powered monitoring systems, have been deployed to enhance security without escalating direct confrontation.

Despite these efforts, the situation remains fragile. The Strait of Hormuz operates under a delicate equilibrium, where any miscalculation—whether an accidental collision, a drone strike, or a misunderstood maneuver—could trigger a chain reaction. Unlike earlier eras where closure or control was imposed by conquest or colonial administration, the 21st century has brought a complex blend of political posturing, cyber conflict, asymmetric naval engagement, and economic leverage.

In essence, the Strait of Hormuz in the 21st century is a theater of constant strategic contest, not through large-scale warfare but through persistent low-level conflict and maneuvering. Its importance as a global energy chokepoint ensures that every regional dispute has international consequences, and its continued openness depends not only on naval dominance but also on sustained diplomatic engagement, intelligence coordination, and the careful management of rapidly evolving threats.

8. Legal, Economic, and Security Implications

The unique status of the Strait of Hormuz as both a geographically narrow chokepoint and a high-volume transit corridor for global energy has made it the subject of sustained international scrutiny across legal, economic, and security dimensions. Despite its seemingly simple function as a passage between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, the strait embodies a complex web of international legal frameworks, economic interdependencies, and military responsibilities. Understanding these interrelated domains is essential to

assessing the full scope of risk and responsibility associated with this critical maritime artery.

International Law and Freedom of Navigation

The Strait of Hormuz is governed primarily by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which, while not ratified by all relevant parties (notably the United States), serves as the widely accepted legal framework for maritime conduct. According to UNCLOS, straits used for international navigation, such as the Strait of Hormuz, are subject to transit passage rights. This legal regime ensures that ships and aircraft of all nations may navigate or fly through the strait without hindrance, provided they do so without threatening the peace, good order, or security of bordering states.

Iran, however, interprets these provisions differently. While Iran is a signatory to UNCLOS, it insists that only countries that have ratified the treaty are entitled to benefit from transit passage. Moreover, Iran has occasionally challenged U.S. naval operations in the strait, arguing that they violate Iranian sovereignty—a claim the United States, which asserts freedom of navigation based on customary international law, rejects. These conflicting interpretations have led to repeated confrontations and underscore the ambiguity of legal enforcement in contested maritime zones.

At stake is not merely the principle of legal access, but the broader question of how international law functions in a security environment defined by asymmetric threats, disputed sovereignty claims, and the involvement of non-state actors. As a result, freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, while nominally protected by international law, is constantly shaped by political and military power dynamics.

Economic Impact of Disruptions and Insurance Risks

The economic implications of any disruption in the Strait of Hormuz are immediate and severe. Approximately 17 to 20 million barrels of crude oil per day pass through the strait, along with significant volumes of liquefied natural gas (LNG), particularly from Qatar. Even the perception of risk—such as a credible

threat of closure, an attack on a tanker, or a regional military escalation—can send global energy prices sharply higher within hours.

One of the most direct economic consequences of instability in the Strait is the increase in maritime insurance premiums, particularly for war risk insurance. Following the 2019 tanker incidents and during periods of heightened U.S.–Iran tensions, underwriters raised premiums dramatically, adding millions of dollars in additional costs to each voyage. For smaller shipping companies, this can be prohibitive, forcing rerouting or even suspension of operations. These cost increases are ultimately passed along to consumers and industries, exacerbating inflation and supply chain volatility.

Moreover, the ripple effects extend beyond energy markets. The strait's importance to global supply chains, particularly in petrochemicals and industrial shipping, means that even a partial or temporary closure could cause widespread delays, shortages, and market uncertainty. The economic system, in essence, treats the Strait of Hormuz not merely as a route, but as a critical infrastructure node, whose functioning is indispensable to global economic stability.

Role of Multilateral Naval Operations

In response to these persistent risks, a series of multilateral naval operations have emerged to safeguard maritime traffic and ensure that freedom of navigation is not just a legal abstraction but a practical reality. These operations include coalition efforts such as:

- Operation Sentinel (2019–present), initiated by the United States as part of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), aimed at deterring Iranian aggression and protecting commercial vessels.
- Operation Prosperity Guardian, a continuation of maritime monitoring and response in the Gulf region with increased participation from NATO allies, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and other partners.
- European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), launched by France with support from the Netherlands and other EU nations,

providing independent surveillance and intelligence to bolster regional stability.

These efforts reflect a growing recognition that collective security arrangements are more sustainable and politically viable than unilateral patrols. Multinational coalitions not only distribute the operational burden but also lend legitimacy to security operations, reducing the likelihood of direct confrontation with regional powers such as Iran.

However, multilateral coordination is not without challenges. Differences in threat assessment, operational rules of engagement, and political sensitivities can complicate joint missions. For example, some nations participating in IMSC have declined to directly escort vessels, preferring instead to provide intelligence or diplomatic support. This underscores the fragmented nature of maritime governance in high-risk zones, where consensus is often hard-won and operational cohesion can be difficult to maintain.

Despite these limitations, the continued presence of multinational naval forces has proven to be a deterrent against large-scale disruptions, while also serving as a backstop to global energy markets. These operations have thus become a semi-permanent feature of the security architecture surrounding the Strait of Hormuz.

In conclusion, the legal, economic, and security implications of the Strait of Hormuz are deeply intertwined. While international law provides a foundation for free navigation, enforcement is ultimately contingent upon military presence and geopolitical calculation. Economic stability, meanwhile, is predicated on both real and perceived security, with disruptions carrying far-reaching consequences. Multilateral naval operations represent the current best practice in preserving this balance, though they remain vulnerable to the very political tensions they are designed to contain. The Strait of Hormuz, therefore, continues to embody the convergence of law, power, and commerce in the 21st-century international order.

9. Conclusion

The Strait of Hormuz stands as a symbol of continuity in the interplay between geography, commerce, and conflict. From the earliest maritime exchanges between ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley to the militarized shipping lanes of the 21st century, the strait has functioned as both a lifeline for global trade and a battleground for regional and international power struggles. Its strategic value, once derived from the flow of spices, gems, and incense, now lies in its role as the narrow conduit for a substantial portion of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas. This enduring duality—economic artery and geopolitical fault line—has shaped its history and will continue to define its future.

As the world grows more interconnected through global supply chains and energy markets, the Strait of Hormuz remains indispensable. Approximately one-fifth of globally traded oil still transits its waters, making any disruption an immediate concern for both producers and consumers on every continent. Yet this very interdependence—while a source of vulnerability—also creates incentives for restraint and cooperation. No single power, including Iran, the United States, or Gulf monarchies, benefits from a complete shutdown of the strait. This shared interest has contributed to the preservation of uneasy stability, even amid episodes of open hostility, covert sabotage, and brinkmanship.

Nevertheless, the margin for error remains narrow. The militarization of the region, the proliferation of asymmetric capabilities, and the involvement of non-state actors mean that any localized incident could rapidly escalate into a wider conflict. The presence of multinational naval coalitions has helped reduce the risk of unilateral aggression, but it has not eliminated the possibility of miscalculation or provocation. Long-term stability depends not only on deterrence but also on diplomacy—specifically, the establishment of clearer rules of engagement, improved communication channels, and regional agreements on maritime security.

The history of the Strait of Hormuz offers strategic lessons for future generations. First, it demonstrates the persistent importance of chokepoints in shaping global power structures. Empires, city-states, and corporations have all vied for influence

here, and those that secured control over the strait often wielded disproportionate influence in wider geopolitical affairs. Second, the strait teaches us that geography may be fixed, but control is fluid—subject to changes in technology, alliances, and economic systems. Finally, the strait reminds us that trade and conflict are often two sides of the same coin; the very value that makes a location indispensable also makes it vulnerable.

In sum, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a narrow passage of water but a dynamic stage upon which the forces of commerce, sovereignty, ideology, and survival have played out across millennia. Its future will likely echo its past: contested, critical, and central to the world's unfolding story. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that this ancient corridor of trade does not become a catalyst for modern catastrophe. Stability, though fragile, remains possible—if the lessons of history are heeded.

Epilogue: At the Time of Writing

As this paper reaches completion, the Strait of Hormuz once again stands at the edge of history, not merely as an academic subject but as an unfolding geopolitical flashpoint. In June 2025, following coordinated U.S. airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, Iran's parliament authorized the closure of the strait—a symbolic yet potent gesture underscoring the waterway's enduring strategic leverage. While the final decision rests with Iran's Supreme National Security Council and has not yet been enacted, the global consequences have already begun to ripple outward. Oil prices surged nearly 10%, shipping insurers raised rates, and governments from Athens to Tokyo issued alerts to commercial fleets.

Though the strait remains operational, increased naval deployments and reported disruptions, such as GPS interference and tanker collisions, suggest a volatile and fragile environment. In this moment, the themes of this paper—economic dependency, legal ambiguity, and asymmetric threat—are not theoretical constructs but living realities. The Strait of Hormuz continues to function as both lifeline and lever, a narrow maritime corridor through which global fortunes flow

and global tensions converge. Its ancient history offers context, but its future remains deeply uncertain—shaped by decisions yet to be made, and by conflicts yet to be averted.

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