



Securing the Arteries of Global Trade: US Foreign Policy in the Strait of Hormuz

Muhammad Sheheryaar

BS International Relations
NUML Faisalabad Campus

Maryam Ali*

Lecturer, International Relations
NUML Faisalabad Campus

Correspondence Author Email: maryam.ali@numl.edu.pk

Khadija Shahbaz

Lecturer International Relations
NUML Faisalabad Campus

Abstract

At the start of 2026, the maritime security situation in the Persian Gulf had reached a historic grey-zone tipping point, moving from friction to high-intensity conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IR Iran) that have been decades in the making. This research report examines the multi-faceted character of the Strait of Hormuz as the most vital energy chokepoint in the world, through which approximately 20 million barrels of oil per day and almost 2/5 of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) passes. On 28 Feb 2026, the waterway was effectively shut down after a massive operation involving the U.S. and Israel known as Operation Epic Fury triggered several days of violence. On 28 Feb 2026, the U.S.-Israeli Operation Epic Fury sparked a series of violent days, effectively shutting down the waterway and causing a world fuel crisis that engendered a fundamental reassessment of the Carter Doctrine. The discussion also explores the legal realities of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) against customary regimes of innocent passage, and offers the conclusion that the current crisis has accelerated a permanent shift towards a new security regime of 'mini-lateral alignments' and 'alternative bypasses'. In the end, this report demonstrates the inadequacy of maritime coercion in a technological proliferation and economic interdependence world, as U.S. military power is beyond measure when it comes to reducing conventional threats.

Keywords:

Strait of Hormuz, US Foreign Policy, Maritime Security, Energy Geopolitics, Asymmetric Warfare, 2026 Iran War, UNCLOS.

Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz is a vital and sensitive waterway in the global geopolitical landscape, where it links the main oil-producing nations, such as the prolific oil producers of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. It is located between the Musandam Peninsula in Oman and the coastal plains of southern Iran, and is naturally cramped. The narrowest part of the Strait is only two miles wide for inbound/outbound traffic and two miles wide for the buffer zone. Yet, in spite of this small area, a tremendous amount of world energy wealth flows through these waters. Prior to the conflicts, the Strait has been used to transport around 20 million

barrels of crude oil per day, which accounts for nearly 20 per cent of the world's petroleum consumption, as well as almost a quarter of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG). The Strait is the final single chokepoint for the stability of the global economy, especially for LNG, as there are no other viable pipeline options to completely avoid it (International Energy Agency [IEA] 2026).

The key principle of U.S. Middle East foreign policy has been to keep this waterway open to guarantee continuous, uninterrupted access to energy resources at reasonable cost to the world markets for more than 40 years. This hegemonic mandate required the presence and upkeep of U.S. military bases in the region on a massive scale, and on a permanent basis. This forward-looking attitude crystallized into the Carter Doctrine of the 1980s, a key policy statement which explicitly declared the Persian Gulf a key defense area and equated the stability of the Gulf and the unsuppressed flow of its resources with the vital national survival of the United States. The U.S. Fifth fleet, based in Bahrain, thus took over the historical role of the world's upholder of freedom of navigation. Washington offered the Gulf Arab monarchies a powerful security guarantee, in return for being assured a steady energy supply. But the bedrock of this long-established situation eventually came tumbling down in the wake of the devastating war of 2026. Final breach of this historical "paradigm" came on 28 February 2026 when it was no longer an "area of grey" but a "matter of conflict." The inciting event was an American-Israeli military joint operation named "Operation Epic Fury" which sought to "neutralize" Iranian command-and-control nodes and nuclear enrichment facilities and ultimately end with the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responded with an unprecedented campaign of horizontal escalation in response to the defiance. But the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) did not back down but instead responded with an unprecedented campaign of horizontal escalation. Iranian forces used a high-tech, highly decentralized arsenal of One-Way Attack (OWA) uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), sea mines capable of evading sonar, and small numbers of fast-attack missile craft as part of their arsenal, having invested many years over decades in these asymmetric technologies. With the deployment of these assets in the narrow transit lanes of the Strait, the IRGC was able to successfully threaten the U.S.-led maritime order and create a "smart control" regime. This ad hoc targeting of ships immediately made the commercial road a highly fortified belligerent zone in which Iran could easily and regularly disrupt ship traffic, and could single out vessels that it saw as its adversaries for intimidation and harassment, and could also demand exorbitant security tolls, well in excess of \$1 million a vessel, from neutral parties.

The 2026 crisis caused the greatest disruption in world energy markets since the 1973 oil embargo and the prolonged Tanker War in the 1980s. The price of Brent crude quickly surpassed \$100 a barrel, as a result of both physical supply shortages and the rapid demise of maritime insurance coverage. As of April 2026, there were over 230 huge commercial tank vessels carrying over 136 million barrels of fuel, drifting without direction in the waters of the Persian Gulf, which are rife with mines (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2026). The shock hit Asian economies, particularly China, India, Japan and South Korea, that import some 80 per cent of the oil that passes through the Strait, very hard. It exposed the very fragile nature of super-concentrated supply chains and saw Asian governments create emergency "Gas Shock Playbooks", utilise strategic gas reserves and introduce draconic industrial rationing, thereby putting the military crisis in Asia straight into a global macroeconomic recession.

The U.S. response was a radical departure from naval dogma of the past, which had been all about fulfilling obligations to ensure universal freedom of navigation. President Donald Trump added a new strategic imperative to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, to "blockade the blockaders" (Time,

2026). The U.S. Navy abandoned its traditional policy of providing safe passage for everyone in the commercial sector to become a flagship policy of targeting Iranian-flagged cargo and blocking traffic to and from Iranian ports. This counter-blockade was supported with advanced naval assets, such as eight Aegis-class guided-missile destroyers and the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. These forces set out upon a painstakingly slow, dangerous, mission to clear Iranian Maham-type sea mines from commercial shipping lanes. But, though the U.S. systematically demolished the remains of Iran's traditional blue-water navy, conventional U.S. superiority failed to put an end to the IRGC's deeply embedded asymmetric capabilities, camouflaged by the Zagros mountain coastline.

This standoff occurred at a tactical level, and the Strait was caught between the two realities: kinetic warfare and a competing diplomatic and legal struggle for international legitimacy. The situation essentially turned the uncertainties of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) into a weapon. The United States were zealous advocates for the undeniable right of "transit passage" as a "binding customary rule of international law," while Iran was a strident advocate of the narrower doctrine of "innocent passage" to justify suspending transit based on national security concerns and charging high vetting fees (Chatham House, 2026). This "juridical warfare" essentially rendered the United Nations Security Council impotent as it stalled on the issue of resolutions for a required mission to protect the seas at the table where geopolitical competition vied for a seat at the table. But, to protect their critical infrastructure from catastrophic kinetic damage, Gulf Arab countries initiated a historic shift from the U.S. security blanket. Strategic de-Westernisation of the region was in progress: Discontent with American strategic guidance led to a speeding up of the quest for strategic independence, along with mini-lateral security realignments and a focus on alternate energy corridors bypassing the West, marking the end of unipolar American rule in the Persian Gulf.

Literature Review

The Strait of Hormuz has been a subject of scholarly interest since time immemorial, not least in the context of energy security, competition in the region, and international law. A study by Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy (Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy, n.d.) reveals that world oil markets are highly vulnerable to any disruption of Strait traffic; a partial closure will lead to potentially catastrophic price spikes and global economic turmoil. The U.S. heavy use of the Fifth Fleet and the IRGC's asymmetric and irregular posture frequently generates a negative feedback loop that includes a never ending cycle of escalation and deterrence testing, according to literature on the subject of regional security dilemmas. Drawing on the theory of Classical Realism, the researchers suggest that the Strait is not only a geographical choke point, but an important space where the survival of the hegemon is linked to the continuity of the flow of hydrocarbon resources. In addition, global demand for oil is extremely sensitive, so that any disruption in Hormuz immediately translates into a systemic, macro-economic crisis, making the passage a recurring flash point between super powers and regional powers.

This discourse is often prefaced by historical case studies, especially detailed examinations of the "Tanker War" during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Operational examples of super power involvement in chokepoint security include such operations as Operation Earnest Will, where the U.S. re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers to ensure they remained safe from Iranian attack by missiles and mines. This historical literature leads many to view the Strait not only as a highway for transporting energy, but also as a highly disputed geopolitical flashpoint where interest of the global superpowers and ambitious regional hegemons inevitably collide and conflict. The current U.S. maritime strategy is often said to have originated with the Carter Doctrine of the 1980s, which first declared the Persian Gulf to be a zone of vital national interest, thus rationalizing

decades of military entrenchment. History teaches Washington's strategic role over the Gulf monarchies as institutionalized and begat the scale of today's deployments in the Gulf.

The legal aspect of the Strait is another much-debated academic field which is related to the different versions of the Convention on the Law of the Sea of the United Nations (UNCLOS) of 1982. The majority of the international community believes in the regime of "transit passage" unhindered passage, uninterrupted, and expeditious passage of all ships, including military ships but scholars often point out that the United States and Iran have not ratified the convention. However, literature on Iranian legal statecraft highlights the constant protests by Tehran against the transit passage regime and the adoption of "innocent passage" as a much narrower definition of "innocent passage" that it asserts as customary international law to impose its sovereign rights over territorial waters (Chatham House, 2026). It is not just theoretical, legal scholars say, as the difference is exploited actively. Iran's regular charge of tolls, prior notification for warships and its aggressive screening of commercial vessels are clear violations of international norms. Academic discussion also acknowledges that in the law of maritime warfare, belligerent rights come into play in the height of war, adding to the difficulty of legal jurisdictions. The juridical indeterminacy is extensively discussed as a central element of Iran's "smart control" policy, which is a rhetorical, pseudo-legitimate justification for enacting strategies of physical coercion, selective interdiction and asymmetric taxation at sea.

In recent years, the technological development of maritime security has become a major subject of interest, with the growing number of uncrewed systems, drone swarms and threats to energy infrastructure. Intelligence reports and defense analysts say traditional, capital-heavy naval blockades are being successfully replaced with de facto blockades using One-Way Attack (OWA) drones and advanced, sonar-evading sea mines such as the Maham series (Windward, 2026). Academic studies reveal that this new paradigm would be very expensive, with the cost of the sophisticated interceptor missiles being many millions of dollars compared to the thousands spent on producing the uncrewed aerial vehicle. In addition, studies have shown that maritime cyberattacks have surged significantly, and the operational technology (OT) of critical port infrastructure and liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals are particularly vulnerable. The physical and digital threats have fused and extended the field of friction beyond the Strait to the digital networks and logistics chains that manage global shipping. Thus, military thinkers recommend that the traditional surface fleet be spread out and more vulnerable, and suggest a transition toward unmanned, distributed, maritime systems to secure choke points.

Last but not least, political economy analysts are interested in the recent transformation of world energy markets, including the "Eastward shift" of Middle Eastern exports. In fact, by 2024, almost 84% of crude oil and condensate exports via the Strait went to Asian markets, with a significant structural dependence. Institutional literature such as the Baker Institute's 'Gas Shock Playbooks: How to prepare for the next phase of pressure on the world's most vulnerable nations' documents the extent of this dependence leading to the creation of complex playbooks to prepare for the next round of gas shock in Asian countries, and a call for a rethinking of structural trade routes and alternative pipelines, including the Saudi East-West Pipeline and the Emirati ADCOP pipeline (Baker Institute, 2026). The literature on economics often mentions, however, that such bypasses simply don't have the ability to compensate for a complete blockage of the Strait, especially in cases of large-scale Qatar LNG exports. At the same time, studies on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) show rising doubts among Arab allies about Washington's security guarantees. There have been other occasions in the past when attacks on regional infrastructure have not been retaliated, which has stimulated academic debate about strategic autonomy in the Gulf. analysts note that the hedging policies of the GCC States are gaining momentum and

that new multipolar regional security architectures are emerging, which seek to include other world powers, such as China and Russia (Middle East Council, n.d.). The economic impact of the Eastward drift - and the fading confidence in U.S. hegemony - is deeply undermining the unipolar regional structure and is leading to a multifaceted complex of mini-lateral security realignments, this literature states.

Research Questions

1. What has been the historical development of the Carter Doctrine and its respective corollaries and how this new status of the U.S. military affected the present tactical decision-making and overall military posture in the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis?
2. How systemic economic and geopolitical is the Asian energy security impact of the 2026 blockade and how is this crisis convincing a permanent rebalancing of regional security structures in the Middle East?

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Classical Realism is the main theory used in this study. Realism begins with the understanding that states are the primary actors in an international system where there is no central government and that the animating principle of the international state system is a state's self-interest and desire for security, as advanced by the founders of realism like Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes. In the Persian Gulf, the U.S. desire to keep a hegemonic security umbrella is viewed not as an act of global beneficence but as a sensible means of ensuring the survival of the nation and its control of the flow of vital energy resources.

The classic realist view of war is evident in the 2026 dynamics of warfare. Smart control and asymmetric leverage are by far the most effective means of challenging the U.S. attempts to optimize its power projection by naval blockades, and have to counter the threat of Iranian survival and regional influence. The Strait of Hormuz is not just a trade route; it is a "critical defense zone" in which the strong do what they can, while the weak endure what they must, and in which there is an ever-present security dilemma, marked by constant arms race and brinkmanship.

The framework accounts for the unique maritime context in which this conflict unfolded, and focuses upon the strategic ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan, most notably his book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*. Mahan argued that national greatness was linked with mastery of the seas, which involves controlling key chokepoints and having large, offensive battle fleets. History does not offer a better example of the mission of the U.S. 5th Fleet or of the attempts to codify freedom of navigation with the domination of the surface fleet, such as Operation Sentinel. The modern drawbacks of Mahanian theory are equally evident in the 2026 crisis: the superiority of the big surface fleets is put at risk by the introduction of low-cost, asymmetric weapons such as drone swarms and new sea mines that avoid the traditional naval battle.

In the final, the theory of Commercial Liberalism is used to supplement Realism because of the strong economic incentives and interdependencies that lie behind maritime security. While Realism is based on the idea that war is about winning, Liberalism sees that the cost of force – for example, the global collapse of the fuel market in 2026 – is often greater than the military benefit. This theory emphasizes the importance of international cooperation and international law, including UNCLOS, to govern the global commons, and ensure trade as a positive-sum game. The crisis of 2026 is a case in point of the violent confrontation between Realist power politics and the Liberal concept of economic interdependence, between the forces of war and those of mutually assured economic ruin.

Research Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is anchored in a rigorous congruence analysis, designed to systematically compare the theoretical assumptions of Classical Realism and Commercial Liberalism against the empirical realities of the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis. To establish a robust, data-driven evaluation, the research heavily utilizes spatiotemporal trajectories derived from Automatic Identification Systems (AIS). This quantitative tool provides objective, real-time tracking of vessel behavior, sudden course alterations, and the immediate physical consequences of Iranian "smart control" interdictions on global commercial shipping patterns.

To capture the broader economic fallout, this granular maritime data is synthesized with qualitative and quantitative macroeconomic reports sourced from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the International Energy Agency (IEA), and contemporary strategic think-tanks. By integrating these datasets, the study effectively traces the direct causal mechanisms linking localized military escalations to severe global commodity fluctuations and supply chain disruptions.

Furthermore, a historical comparative approach is integrated to contextualize the 2026 blockade against previous periods of maritime disruption, specifically the 1980s Tanker War and the grey-zone skirmishes of 2019. This historical benchmarking is crucial for measuring the gradual erosion of conventional deterrence and tracking the definitive evolution of naval warfare—from traditional, capital-intensive carrier-based supremacy to modern, decentralized asymmetric drone and sea-mine deployments.

Finally, the study conducts a rigorous juridical analysis, examining the starkly divergent legal interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and maritime warfare law utilized by the United States and Iran. By bridging tactical AIS operational data, macroeconomic modeling, and legal-historical comparisons, this interdisciplinary methodology offers a highly comprehensive, multi-dimensional perspective on the deeply interconnected forces governing modern global maritime security.

The Historical Foundations of U.S. Dominance in the Persian Gulf

The critical energy shortages of the 1970s and geopolitical jolts of the Cold War helped shape the modern architecture of U.S. Middle East foreign policy. Post-1971 British military withdrawal from "East of Suez," the United States was initially hesitant to take on the daunting role of the primary security guarantor, especially at a high price. Instead, it was to follow the "Twin Pillars" policy, turning the region towards Saudi Arabia and Imperial Iran for security. This proxy-based approach, however, failed to go as planned and toppled in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The departure of the Shah marked the dawn of a new era in which the once-heavily armed regional ally became a staunch anti-western enemy and the Persian Gulf would become a hotspot of revolution on the horizon. Indirect control was not enough, however, because of the profound impact on the economy wrought by the Arab oil embargo of 1973. The next event of importance as a geopolitical catalyst was the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which resulted in a radical change of priorities in America's strategic policy.

A paradigm shift occurred in January 1980, when President Jimmy Carter issued the Carter Doctrine, which unambiguously defined the U.S. perspective on the Persian Gulf as the possession of an outside power as a threat to the vital interests of the United States, and declared that it would be defended "by whatever means necessary," including military action. This doctrine made the Gulf a "critical defense area" on a structural level that was equal to Western Europe. It sparked a large institutionalization effort, starting with the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force that eventually became the permanent U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983. It institutionalized the "oil protection formula"—America would give the Arab monarchies an

existential security blanket, in the form of a carrier, and they would keep open an energy supply pipeline to the global market. This was to be the template for four decades of strategic tutelage. This militarized doctrine was first put to the test in the intensive 1980s Tanker War. More than 400 commercial vessels were attacked as the war between Iran and Iraq spread to the sea. In turn, in 1987, the U.S. instituted Operation Earnest Will, re-flagging Kuwaiti oil tankers and providing direct naval escorts to ensure that the oil would reach international markets. Hailed as the golden age of U.S. Fifth Fleet enforcement of freedom of navigation. Most importantly, it also exposed the constant danger of Iranian asymmetric weapons, specifically the basic sea mines and fast-attack speedboats, which would become a major part of the 2026 war's strategy. The liberation of Kuwait in 1991 was the next pivotal liberation in the hands of the Americans, and the "Dual Containment" policy of the 1990s was to isolate Tehran and Baghdad.

The post-9/11 era, though, brought in an era of strategic overreach, and the steady decline of old-fashioned deterrence, leading up to the crisis of 2026. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was meant to remove Iran's chief regional bulwark, only to allow Iran's influence to spread out in the "Shiite Crescent" and make American meddling in the region a major sore spot. The "Maximum Pressure" campaign by the United States after it withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 compelled Iran to pursue its grey-zone activities in the sea with greater intensity. The American defense umbrella threatened by watershed events such as the tanker hijackings of 2019 and the drone attacks on Abqaiq-Khurasan facilities in Saudi Arabia were severely undermined. Since Washington did not retaliate militarily against these non-lethal infractions, the Arab allies were becoming more convinced that America was less likely to shed blood for Gulf oil. It was a clear shift away from Cold War bipolar containment and a multipolar and disjointed contest between the traditional American supremacy and asymmetries.

Operation Epic Fury and the Realities of the 2026 War

On February 28, 2026, the Middle East's political attitude changed from a grey zone harassment to an outright confrontation between two states. The changes were violent, and kicked off with "Operation Epic Fury", a coordinated and large scale aerial and naval strike by the United States and Israel. The operation was meant to halt the Iranian military's ability to develop and build a nuclear weapon while destroying dozens of command posts and advanced nuclear enrichment sites and killing top Iranian military officials. In the first kinetic blow, Iran's blue-water fleet was decimated and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei finally was targeted for assassination. But the strategic planners of allied forces greatly underestimated the resilient capability of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which is operating in a decentralized manner, and the horizontal escalation capability that these forces possess. The IRGC launched an asymmetric retaliation plan, one that had been in place for years, in response to the conventional onslaught. The IRGC reacted to the conventional onslaught by initiating a "retaliation plan" that has been in the works for years – an asymmetric retaliation plan. Iran fired thousands of ballistic missiles and uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) at 14 countries, including five from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This rapid and out-of-control horizontal escalation turned the Middle East into a serious shooting war with a complete breakdown in commercial maritime shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

The defining strategic element of the 2026 crisis soon became the devastatingly effective de facto blockade imposed by the Iranian naval forces with a potent cocktail of sea mines and One-Way Attack (OWA) drones that were highly lethal. Traditional IRGC surface assets were devastated by the first U.S. bombing raids, with some intelligence estimates suggesting that as much as 90 per cent of the IRGC's decentralised, asymmetric fleet, made up of small fast-attack crafts and covert minelayers, survived the attack. The units deployed advanced mines of the

Maham type quickly on the narrow two-mile transit lanes along the rugged Zagros Mountains from heavily fortified coastal cave systems. This involved the delivery of the 300kg magnetic Maham 3 and the very sophisticated Maham 7 which was capable of evading sonar. As a result, by April 2026 more than 150 big commercial boats were left outside the Strait in fear of passing through the mined waters. Iran successfully applied "smart control" with selective drone strikes against non-compliant ships and with radio warnings against them. By doing this Tehran could effectively militarise the Strait without officially calling it closed, giving it political leverage over neutral powers like China, who still needed to rely on the strait.

This was an asymmetric strangulation which forced the operational posture of the U.S. Fifth Fleet to undergo a radical and historic shift. The U.S. strategic imperative was forcefully reshaped and repurposed, breaking away from decades-old status as a secure haven for all such cross-border traffic. President Donald Trump clearly ordered the fleet to go on the offensive against the blockade, a technique that was essentially an effort to "blockade the blockaders" (Time, 2026). The U.S. Navy went on the attack to block Iranian-flagged shipping and to stop any ship from entering or leaving Iranian ports. The U.S. tasked its unmanned maritime systems with the lion's share of the missions to clear the mines and reduce the risk to human lives in such an environment. This involved the operation of Knifefish undersea mine hunting autonomous vehicles and Archerfish air-borne neutralizers launched from the MH-60S helicopters.

Physical conditions at sea were terrible despite all these huge deployments and the presence of a vanguard of eight Aegis class destroyers and the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. There was consistent data from Automatic Identification System (AIS) indicating daily transits of one or less. Finally, the 2026 war set the region into a vicious paradoxical balance. Asymmetric leverage by Iran was directly offset by overwhelming conventional military and economic pressure from the United States (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2026). The IRGC's ability to constrain global energy supply had always been its greatest bargaining chip, and the U.S. counter-blockade had been a crippling blow to Tehran's economy. The competition turned into a political horse-race. Iran's leaders knew their own people were extremely nationalistic and saw the war as an existential threat, and they could withstand economic difficulties much longer than the American people who were starting to lose their patience with rising domestic fuel prices and endless deployments abroad. The sheer technical complexity and difficulty of targeting thousands of mobile, hard-to-detect drones and mine launchers and knocking them out resulted in a protracted U.S. military victory, resulting in the Strait of Hormuz becoming a deadly arena of naval attrition.

Global Economic Shocks and the Fragility of Energy Markets

The sudden closure in 2026 of the Strait of Hormuz triggered the biggest and fastest supply shock in the history of global energy markets, exposing the critical vulnerability of an underwhelmingly too-geographically dependant world economy. Before the war, about 20% of global petroleum demand and nearly 40% of the global liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade used to pass through this tight water corridor every day (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2026). When kinetic hostilities began on February 28, the quantity of maritime traffic dropped off to less than 10 percent of its pre-war quantity. The physical blockade was hugely magnified by the immediate withdrawal of cover from the biggest maritime insurance syndicates like Lloyd's of London, making transit too expensive for most commercial operators. Some 230 huge tankers with some 136 million barrels of fuel impounded in the Persian Gulf plunged world commodity markets into a state of panic in the wake of the sudden loss of 12 million barrels per day of crude and refined products. Within days, prices for Brent crude jumped into the \$100 per barrel range with macroeconomic analysts

forecasting "unrivalled" gains to \$150 an barrel if the naval attrition kept going (Anadolu Agency, 2026).

The supply shock was deep but perhaps even deeper and more enduring on the natural gas market. The Strait supplies 93 percent of Qatar's natural gas exports, which are the world's second largest, with the country nearly completely dependent on the Strait. Direct kinetic damage due to the 2026 war on critical energy infrastructure was very severe, with repeated Iranian drone swarms and missile attacks severely damaging the massive Ras Laffan liquefaction plant, and forcing it completely offline in early March. This meant an estimated 17 per cent of Qatar's global LNG capacity was to be offline for a debilitating three to five years, on a permanent unit of more than 2 billion cubic metres of gas supply per week. The impact of this great "gas shock" was disproportionate as it hit energy-intensive Asian countries with the potential of receiving as much as 90 percent of the LNG crossing the Strait in 2025. In gas dependent developing countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, where gas power accounts for major share of electrical generation, the sudden shortage resulted in a number of industrial curtailments, forced widespread electricity rationing and caused localized economic breakdowns.

With this dire existential energy insecurity as a catalyst, the major Asian importers had to quickly shift from long-term sustainability planning to short-term emergency crisis management, having to trigger their carefully prepared "Gas Shock Playbooks." Historically, about one third of China's total oil demand was met from imports from the Strait, but it was compelled to make a major move towards utilizing its massive strategic petroleum reserve in order to stabilize domestic markets. But because of the continuity of the shock, it required dramatic cuts in heavy industrial production. Economic giants such as Japan, South Korea and India – countries that rely on the Gulf for more than two-thirds of its LNG imports – were similarly driven into an intense and panicked struggle for spot cargoes in the Atlantic Basin. The frenzy over the price of European energy consumers vividly illustrated how quickly energy being a choke point with a local vulnerability spreads to the rest of the global economy, especially when there is such a complicated and unpredictable situation between Russia and Ukraine.

Moreover, the seriously deficient regional bypass infrastructure was made evident by the 2026 crisis, the inevitable system risk of the Strait. The Saudi's East-West Pipeline and the Emirati's Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline (ADCOP) have theoretical capacities of 3.5 to 5.5 million barrels per day of crude that goes into the Red Sea and the Gulf of Oman, but they would not have been able to handle the overwhelming amount of stranded crude exports. Worse, the reliability of these very pipelines was severely undermined by select attacks from Iran on critical desert pumping stations (Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy, n.d.). Most importantly, the massive LNG exports from Qatar and the UAE have no other pipeline routes at all, with the regional system, such as the Dolphin line, having little spare capacity and no linkages with global shipping facilities. It was an extraordinary exposure of the architecture that forced a rethinking, even on a global level, of the flow of trade—this time an historical one—and suddenly made the exploration of Latin American and Arctic energy resources, as well as their resurgence in domestic markets, far more expensive and less viable than investing in coal.

Legal Warfare and the Redefinition of Regional Order

In addition to outfighting one another with ballistic missiles and naval sea mines, the 2026 conflict in the Strait of Hormuz was a contentious struggle in the intricate arena of international diplomacy and maritime law. The central issue underlying this legal battle was the nature of the governing regime of the Strait; whether the one provided in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) under the liberal "transit passage" concept or the more traditional "innocent passage" concept of customary law. The United States, ironically, has never

ratified UNCLOS itself, vigorously contended that transit passage is one of the “iron-clad guarantees” of free and unobstructed passage for “all nations” for decades, and that it serves as an essential element of the UNCLOS. On the other side, Iran powerfully insisted its obligations were limited to the ‘restrictive regime of innocent passage’; as a non-ratifying state, it had no obligations under the Security Council resolutions. Iran has acted aggressively to use this particular legal mechanism, which has the legal authority to temporarily halt traffic on national security grounds, to defend its highly discriminatory practices. Aside from the pretense of protecting the environment and screening for security, Tehran demanded huge transit charges and subjected neutral ships to grueling and exhausting security inspections (Chatham House, 2026).

This intentional legalization of the use of law had a profound effect in the existing rights of neutral states and the traditional practice of maritime warfare. Iran has the legitimate right to lawfully shoot down an enemy warship, as established in the international laws of armed conflict, but there is absolutely no right to attack a neutral merchant ship without provocation. Iran, however, took a cunning step around this important legal safeguard by declaring, on its own, that any commercial ship that was carrying supplies for its designated enemies was “direct, substantial, and effective” in supporting the war effort and thus was no longer protected as a civilian vessel. In an effort to match this legal “brinkmanship,” the United States officially designated any tankers transporting Iranian oil as “war-sustaining” assets and declared that they are legitimate military targets that can be “interdicted” or “destroyed.” This polarization of the law was such that the United Nations virtually was unable to act. UN Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026) was in fact neglected, delayed, and blocked – each time by a different group – after it formally called for the protection of non-belligerent littoral states and the restoration of free trade.

At the same time the 2026 crisis put a rapid end to the overall breakdown of the American-led security system in the Middle East and initiated a highly multipolar regional system. Gulf security since the Carter Doctrine in the '70s has been based on an unconditional, unconditional guarantee of U.S. security umbrella. The war that has been going on for the last few years and going on and on harrows out the structural weakness of this dependence. As these key areas saw their vital assets perish as the U.S. played out a drawn-out standoff, Gulf capitals came to understand that they were not stakeholders who were similarly protected but rather vulnerable operating platforms. As a result, the Arab allies turned towards strategic autonomy with an enthusiasm. This was put into words by the “New Vision” in the GCC region for regional security, which explicitly favored multilateral, inclusive diplomacy inspired by the ASEAN approach over western reliance on military power. Regional peace talks have totally failed and the unilateral U.S. decision to launch a counter-blockade, consensual among the region, was a very high level escalation that has pushed Arab partners deeply into the arms of the Iranians and has irretrievably broken trust in Washington (Middle East Council, n.d.).

The traditional U.S. role of hegemony was waning, and other world powers such as China and Russia were quick to step up as major indirect regional brokers. China, with tremendous economic clout as the biggest buyer of Gulf energy, and with a massive billion barrels strategic reserve, used its diplomatic clout to negotiate selective, ultra-profitable transit deals direct with the Iranian authorities, giving it an energy lifeline for the domestic economy while Western ships blazed a trail. The move showed Beijing to be the most important, irreplaceable diplomatic middle man between Tehran and the five Gulf monarchic, which was already hinted at by the successful Saudi-Iranian reconciliation in 2023 facilitated by Beijing. Therefore, the future security concept of the Middle East is strongly going multipolar and strictly non-aligned. The Gulf

nations are also quickly diversifying their armaments and are buying high-end weaponry and security assurances from Europe and China, as well as from Israel, to prevent falling into the trap of destructive and cyclic military escalations with the United States. Finally, the crisis of 2026 was not only a tragic energy event, but the final and irrefutable end of unchallenged U.S. dominance in the Persian Gulf.

Future Implications

As the 2026 crisis develops in the Strait of Hormuz, it will leave an indelible, enduring mark on the geopolitical and macro-economic world. The long-term impact will be most likely structural de-risking of global energy supply chains. The Strait will definitely no longer be considered a safe shipping lane. This means capital spending will shift markedly towards Atlantic Basin hydrocarbons, onshore Latin American projects and Arctic shipping. This geopolitical realignment will also accelerate the development and deployment of clean energy technologies and aggressive energy efficiency plans at home. States will quickly drop the idea of relying on concentrated energy dependency, replacing it with "distributed resilience," based on producing locally-based renewables as the foundation for national security, shielding economies from vulnerabilities in distant chokepoints.

The naval warfare of 2026 clearly established that the days of symmetric dominance in the littoral waters by the carriers ended. The use of "smart control" and horizontal escalation by Iran, by using cheap OWA drones and advanced mines to paralyse a global chokepoint, will be a blueprint for other middle powers and nonstate actors around chokepoint areas, such as the Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Malacca. This will lead to a serious international naval arms race focusing on uncrewed maritime systems (UUVs) and counter-drone technologies. The future of fleets will require smaller, modular, highly automated ships that must operate and be able to neutralize mines without crewmembers, but in the midst of an environment filled with drone swarms and hypersonic threats, the U.S. Fifth Fleet will be forced into a permanent "blockade" posture.

In the Middle East, the regional security architecture will irrevocably shift from the all-embracing "American security umbrella" towards an expanding multipolar structure that includes Israel and its allies. Arab Gulf countries will value mini-lateral political integration as they have witnessed the devastating failure of conditional U.S. protection. This will require a delicate balancing of regional mediation and China's and the European Union's tremendous leverage. A durable regional peace and stability will depend on a realistic approach to the conflict, what is known as a "cold peace," whereby Iran is included in a grand-scale security body, while Israel's regional presence is accepted. Without such an inclusive framework, the Middle East will be stuck in a cycle of non-linear, asymmetric hybrid warfare that perpetuates the region's unending conflict and destabilizes its peace.

Last but not least, the actual situation of the 2026 crisis will usher a deep change in international law of the sea. With the current "transit passage" regime of the UNCLOS being rendered obsolete in the context of the modern asymmetric war, the international community will have to face the shortcomings of the 1982 framework. This could result in the formation of a "Permission Based Regime" for international straits, enabling the littoral states to properly coordinate processes for international straits transit, safety, and security with global powers via bilateral or multilateral treaties. This would be a radical departure from the notion of "free-spanning straits" as international thoroughfares, and would make them extremely regulated, checked straits where security and environmental issues of coastal countries would take precedence, and where global commerce would move in premium and protected corridors.

Findings

- The 2026 conflict marked the definitive end of the "Grey Zone" era, escalating into a direct state-on-state war where Iran's asymmetric "smart control" tactics successfully undermined conventional U.S. naval dominance in the Strait.
- Iran's deployment of an asymmetric toolkit—comprising OWA drones and advanced Maham 3/7 sea mines—established a highly effective de facto blockade that proved incredibly tedious and hazardous to clear, even with advanced U.S. uncrewed capabilities.
- The crisis triggered an unprecedented global economic supply shock, halting 12 million barrels of oil per day and knocking 17% of Qatari LNG capacity offline for three to five years due to severe infrastructure damage.
- Asian energy security was disproportionately devastated, forcing nations like Pakistan and Bangladesh into severe gas rationing while compelling China to deplete its strategic reserves to prevent total industrial collapse.
- The perceived failure of the U.S. security umbrella permanently alienated Gulf Arab states, accelerating their pursuit of strategic autonomy and new, multipolar mini-lateral security arrangements involving China and Europe.

Conclusion

The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis represents a disastrous and definitive collapse of long-established U.S. maritime hegemony in the Middle East. For nearly fifty years, the Carter Doctrine provided a highly militarized yet economically functional framework that secured American strategic dominance while guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of global energy. However, the fallout from Operation Epic Fury and the subsequent horizontal escalation by Iranian forces conclusively demonstrated that overwhelming conventional superiority can be successfully neutralized by dedicated asymmetric technologies. The Strait, once the most vital commercial highway on Earth, was violently transformed into a belligerent artery where every vessel transit became a matter of extreme kinetic risk and complex legal contestation. The resulting historic gas shocks and oil deficits not only paralyzed world markets but initiated a permanent, structural de-risking of global energy supplies, accelerating the marginalization of the Persian Gulf within the broader macroeconomic cycle.

The strategic, paradoxical equilibrium defining this conflict underscores a stark reality: neither the United States nor its allies possess a rapid military solution to chokepoint blockades in the modern era. While the U.S. Fifth Fleet retains the firepower to decimate Iranian conventional assets, it struggles immensely against the decentralized, low-cost swarm tactics of thousands of hidden drone and mine launchers that effectively render the Strait a no-go zone. This profound tactical realization has shattered the myth of perfect, externally provided security. Consequently, Gulf Arab nations have been forced to urgently reassess their strategic tutelage under Washington. The inevitable result of this war is the cementing of a multipolar security structure—driven by independent GCC initiatives and heavy Chinese diplomatic mediation—arising precisely because the traditional Western security provider could no longer prevent catastrophic damage to regional infrastructure.

Ultimately, the enduring legacy of the Strait of Hormuz crisis will be the radical redefinition of maritime sovereignty and international law. The practical, sustained closure of the waterway revealed that the UNCLOS regime of transit passage is only as robust as the collective political and military will required to enforce it. Without a new, inclusive diplomatic consensus that balances the security interests of coastal states with the economic needs of major global importers, the Strait will remain a permanent geopolitical flashpoint and a volatile chokehold on human civilization. The 2026 crisis serves as the ultimate wake-up call: a global economy utterly

dependent on a single, fragile artery located in an inherently unstable region is fundamentally unsustainable. True energy security will not be achieved by perpetually attempting to blockade the blockaders, but through the rapid diversification of supply routes, the aggressive acceleration of clean energy transitions, and the establishment of an inclusive regional security architecture prioritized on mutual stability rather than unilateral control.

Recommendations

- **Create a Multi-lateral Regional Security Forum:** It is time to shift the US-led Sentinel model to an inclusive multi-lateral forum, including GCC, Iran, and the major Asian importers (China/India/Japan) to deal with the chokepoint risks using a common ASEAN-style security framework.
- **Mandate Strategic LNG Reserves:** Asian and European energy importers should also have a 90-day strategic liquid natural gas stock, similar to oil SPRs, to counter the impact of a series of outages over multiple years associated with the destruction of infrastructure in Qatar.
- Strategies to accelerate bypass pipeline integration regional producers must focus on short term growth of the Saudi East-West and UAE ADCOP pipelines of 10-12 mb/d capacity, but should diversify export terminals off the Strait.
- **Codify Managed Artery Legal Standards:** Launch a diplomatic process in the UN to revise the laws of international straits to explicitly legalize the use of tolls, vetting and securing neutral energy flows during smart control blockades.
- **Decentralize Energy Supply Chains:** Long-term U.S. and Asian foreign policy ought to encourage energy exploration in off-chokepoint areas such as Latin America and Arctic to make global trade less susceptible to Persian Gulf instability.
- **Unmanned mines clearance:** Institutionalize Unmanned mine clearance All major navies should upgrade to permanent, automated mine-clearing and drone defense as a normal policy to chokepoint security, decreasing the human risk of the tedious and hazardous labor of manual mine clearance.

References

- Baker Institute. (2026). *Maritime chokepoints and global energy security*. Retrieved from <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/20260316-Maritime%20Chokepoints.pdf>
- Chatham House. (2026). *Strait of Hormuz: Shipping and the law in times of crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/04/strait-hormuz-shipping-and-law>
- Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy. (n.d.). *Gulf energy disruption and the fragility of global markets*. Retrieved from <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/gulf-energy-disruption-and-the-fragility-of-global-markets/>
- International Energy Agency (IEA). (2026). *Key facts on the Strait of Hormuz oil and gas markets and emergency response*. Retrieved from <https://www.iea.org/about/oil-security-and-emergency-response/strait-of-hormuz>
- International Journal of FMR. (2025). *Maritime energy security and chokepoint risks*. Retrieved from <https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2025/6/56232.pdf>
- Middle East Council. (n.d.). *Reframing the Gulf regional security architecture*. Retrieved from https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/reframing-the-gulf-regional-security-architecture/

- Time. (2026). *Amid Trump's blockade, threat of escalation leaves thousands of U.S. forces on high alert*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/article/2026/04/15/amid-trump-s-blockade-threat-of-escalation-leaves-thousands-of-u-s-forces-on-high-alert/>
- Windward. (2026, April 19). *Iran war maritime intelligence daily*. Retrieved from <https://windward.ai/blog/april-19-2026-iran-war-maritime-intelligence-daily/>