The Limits of Naval Deterrence in the Strait of Hormuz: Lessons for Indo-Pacific Maritime Security

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At the edge of the Arabian Peninsula, the Strait of Hormuz constitutes the primary maritime chokepoint of the energy system through which a consequent proportion of raw materials and manufactured products transit towards Europe and Asia. Linking the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea, through which flows roughly a quarter of global oil daily consumption, as the sole passage between the highly securitised hydrocarbon offshore fields of Iran and the GCC countries, and the destination Indo-Pacific economies such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea. Because most Gulf energy exports lack viable alternative routes, even temporary disruptions in Hormuz directly affect global markets and maritime trade.

Escalation Context (2023–2026)

Maritime security in the region has deteriorated significantly: following Operation Rising Lion in June 2025, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy has repeatedly harassed commercial vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, intercepting and diverting oil tankers towards their territorial waters. This pattern mirrored similar incidents in the wider region, instigated by the Houthis in the Red Sea from late 2023 onwards. In response, the United States and allied navies increased maritime patrols and naval drill operations aimed at deterring attacks on commercial shipping. Despite these deployments, incidents of maritime coercion persisted, culminating in the 2026 conflict, when heightened US-Iran tensions again threatened the Strait's security. Thus, why have sustained naval deployments failed to produce durable maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz?

Persistent Maritime Disruption in the Strait of Hormuz

Maritime harassment and tanker seizures

Iranian maritime coercion in the Strait of Hormuz has taken the form of repeated harassment and seizure of commercial vessels transiting the Gulf. According to U.S. officials, Iranian forces interfered with the navigational rights of at least 15 foreign-flagged commercial vessels between 2021 and 2023, which illustrates a sustained pattern of maritime pressure. Following the American strikes on Iran in June 2025, the tanker Talara was intercepted and forced into Iranian waters by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. U.S. Central Command reported that IRGC forces boarded the tanker

using a helicopter while a U.S. Navy drone observed the seizure. Such events are consistent with Iran's broader strategy of coercive maritime signalling. IRGC naval forces frequently conduct aggressive manoeuvres of commercial vessels operating near the Strait to carve their sphere of influence surrounding the Strait. In July 2025, the confrontation between an Iranian naval helicopter and the U.S. destroyer USS Fitzgerald in the Gulf of Oman, while limited and not prone to escalation, exemplified how even U.S naval forces in the region operated in a frictional environment. Strategic assessments suggest that this behaviour represents a core part of Iran's offshore strategy regarding the Arabian Sea.

Asymmetric Maritime Capabilities: Mines, Missiles and Drones

Beyond harassment and vessel seizures, Iran maintains asymmetric capabilities that allow it to raise the costs of naval intervention in the Strait of Hormuz. Faced with superior U.S. and allied naval forces, Iran's coastal defence doctrine relies on disruptive tools to offset conventional disadvantages and impose disproportionate costs on naval intervention in the Strait. In this context, Iran relies on naval mines to punch above its weight and inflict maximum damage through minimal means. A recent U.S. congressional assessment estimated that Iran possesses approximately 6,000 naval mines, capable of damaging large vessels. These systems can be deployed rapidly by specialised minelayers, providing Iran with the elastic capability to obstruct maritime traffic in the narrow waterway. The mines have already been employed during the Iran–Iraq War, when Iran deployed them in the Persian Gulf as part of the so-called "Tanker War." In April 1988, the U.S. guided-missile frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts struck an Iranian mine while escorting tankers in the Gulf, suffering severe damage. As of March 2O26, CNN reporting suggests that Iran has again begun laying mines in the Strait of Hormuz amid the current escalation framework, underscoring the persisting relevance of these weapons.

At the same time, Iran has sought to strengthen its anti-ship strike abilities, in part through last February's finalised acquisition of Chinese-made CM-302 cruise missiles, supersonic systems with a range of nearly 300 kilometres designed to evade shipborne defences by flying low and at high speed. If deployed, such a modern missile arsenal would greatly expand Iran's ability to threaten both commercial vessels and naval forces operating in the Strait, even in the presence of a sustained multinational naval deployment led by the U.S. Fifth Fleet. By combining naval mines, anti-ship missiles and drones in the narrow 21 nautical miles of the Strait of Hormuz, Iran retains the ability to

obstruct shipping and threaten closure of the waterway, providing Tehran with leverage over the world's most critical energy corridor.

The Structural Limits of Naval Deterrence

While multinational naval patrols and exercises (such as Indigo Defender) have effectively helped protect transiting individual vessels, they have not restored pre-2023 levels of maritime traffic or insurance conditions. Moreover, until early 2026, responses to Iranian actions largely consisted of limited retaliatory strikes and defensive operations. Western naval forces avoided broader escalation due to the risk of triggering a regional conflict and the potential political costs of a prolonged war, which constrained the credibility of deterrence. At the same time, the U.S. Navy faces increasing demands in the Indo-Pacific theatre, where maintaining credible deterrence remains the Trump administration's priority, as per the 2025 National Security Strategy.

Then, deterrence calculations are further complicated by Iran's latent nuclear capabilities. Tehran's growing stockpile of enriched uranium and its potential ability to produce weapons-grade material introduce a higher escalation threshold in any confrontation. This nuclear dimension reinforces caution in U.S. responses, as actions taken to enforce maritime deterrence risk triggering enormous political consequences. As a result, the effectiveness of conventional naval power through carrier strike groups' deployment becomes constrained. Moreover, Iranian drones and missiles impose disproportionate defensive costs on naval forces tasked with protecting commercial shipping, as Interceptors used by Israel and the US are much more expensive. Prolonged conflict forces the US and Israel to use up high-value assets to intercept comparatively low-cost threats. Combined with the regime's willingness to endure significant losses, this dynamic creates a strategic imbalance: one side possesses far greater material power, while the other relies on resilience and cost-imposition.

Grey-zone maritime warfare

A further limitation of naval deterrence lies in Iran's grey-zone tactics, which aim to produce detrimental effects while remaining below the threshold of open conflict. Iran has developed a coercion strategy designed to advance its regional objectives: conscious of its conventional military inferiority, Tehran relied on calibrated harassment while preserving plausible deniability. This approach reflects Iran's "grey-zone way of war," characterised by indirection, ambiguity and strategic patience. Rather than seeking decisive confrontation, Iranian strategy emphasises cumulative pressure, testing the resolve of its adversaries while carefully managing escalation. For instance, the 2019 drone and cruise-missile strike on Saudi oil infrastructure, widely attributed to Iranian capabilities, temporarily disrupted Saudi oil production while avoiding direct military confrontation with the United States. These grey-zone tactics exploit the structural limitations of conventional naval deterrence. Because individual incidents remain limited in scale, they rarely provoke decisive military responses. However, the events of early 2026 demonstrate how this strategy can escalate beyond the grey-zone environment, testing the limits of naval deterrence in the Strait of Hormuz.

Crisis Test: The 2026 Hormuz Escalation

The crisis reached its peak in early March 2026, when open military confrontation between the United States and Iran expanded across the Gulf following strikes on Iranian military infrastructure and retaliatory attacks on regional bases and maritime traffic.

Escalation of the grey-zone conflict

Prolonged grey-zone pressure built over the years ultimately transitioned into the U.S.–Israeli army's targeting Iranian military infrastructure countrywide. Tehran responded with an assertive strike campaign over the region, including strikes on states hosting U.S. forces such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iraq. These attacks appear designed less to defeat adversaries militarily than to raise the political costs of continued intervention. At the same time, Iran intensified maritime pressure in the Strait of Hormuz, threatening to halt oil exports and conducting attacks against merchant shipping. Several commercial vessels were struck in March 2026, while the United States responded by sinking Iranian mine-laying vessels and warships. Moreover, sporadic attacks against

shipping raise insurance premiums and global oil prices, illustrating how maritime coercion can rapidly escalate from calibrated harassment into wider regional confrontation once deterrence thresholds are crossed.

Maritime disruption and the limits of deterrence

Despite the presence of significant U.S. and allied naval forces in the Gulf, maritime disruption intensified during the war. Tanker operators reported vessels becoming "sitting ducks" as attacks expanded across the Gulf, while dozens of ships were stranded. Even under peak naval deployment, the escalation challenged the assumption that military buildup alone stabilises maritime chokepoints. Commercial vessels were damaged and traffic partially diverted as operators reassessed the risks of transiting the Strait. Industry analysts noted that even limited attacks forced shipping companies to suspend transit or reroute vessels, highlighting the vulnerability of concentrated traffic in the narrow waterway. The Strait ultimately remained partially open, but the crisis confirmed the structural limits identified earlier: escalation constraints limited decisive retaliation, low-cost asymmetric attacks imposed disproportionate defensive burdens, and the geography of the chokepoint amplified economic upheaval. The 2026 Iran war therefore represents the culmination of deterrence failure, demonstrating that sustained naval deployments cannot guarantee secure passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

Implications for Indo-Pacific Maritime Security

As the Indian Ocean increasingly becomes a theatre of great-power competition, the Strait of Hormuz constitutes the western gateway of the Indo-Pacific maritime system, linking Gulf energy exports to the wider network of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) stretching across the Indian Ocean toward the Strait of Malacca and East Asian markets.

China: Securing Energy Supply Routes

China, the second-largest economy in the world, is structurally dependent on external hydrocarbons. The country imports roughly three-quarters of its oil consumption, making it the world's largest crude oil importer, and 54% of these imports originate in the Middle East. China's

dependency thus creates a strategic vulnerability, prompting the country to safeguard its supply routes, as a prolonged upset of Gulf flows would threaten China's economic stability and relative power.

However, China currently relies on maritime routes largely secured by Western naval capabilities to acquire its supplies. In response to this vulnerability, Beijing began to assert a greater security presence in the wider Indian Ocean region, concurrently building naval infrastructure in coastal states as part of the comprehensive String of Pearls network. Last year, China participated in joint naval drills with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman, codenamed "Security Belt 2025", conducted near the Iranian port of Chabahar and aimed at reinforcing security cooperation between the three states. The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 was at the forefront of this transformation: while officially supporting anti-piracy missions and peacekeeping, the base provides Beijing with a permanent foothold near one of the world's most important maritime routes connecting Asia, the Middle East and Europe In this regard, the 2026 Hormuz crisis reinforces Chinese attention and may encourage the intensification of deployments to protect its interests, sidelined by American naval power.

India: Emerging Regional Security Provider

India is likewise dependent on maritime energy flows originating in the Persian Gulf. Roughly 55% of its crude oil imports come from the Middle East. More broadly, over 95% of India's trade volume is transported by sea, meaning that the non-interruption of chokepoint trade is key to the country's economic stability. Recent regional crises have highlighted this vulnerability. During the 2023–2024 Red Sea crisis, attacks on commercial shipping forced vessels to reroute around Africa, threatening major trade flows between Asia and Europe. In response, India has expanded its naval engagement across the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy deployed guided-missile destroyers such as INS Kochi, INS Kolkata and INS Mormugao, alongside maritime patrol aircraft and anti-piracy patrol vessels to maintain maritime surveillance across India's Arabian Sea approaches. Furthermore, Indian maritime doctrine increasingly frames the country as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean, responsible for safeguarding regional stability and protecting critical SLOCs linking the Persian Gulf to Indo-Pacific markets.

While China's maritime strategy focuses on protecting the energy supply chain through infrastructure development and expanding naval presence across the Indian Ocean, India presents itself as a regional security provider responsible for safeguarding the stability

of maritime trade routes shared by Sea Lines of Communication. Instability in Hormuz thus reverberates far beyond the Gulf, affecting the maritime trade routes that sustain the energy security of the Indo-Pacific's largest economies.

Policy Options

Option 1: Layered Chokepoint Defence Architecture

Instead of relying primarily on dispersed naval patrols, coalition navies could establish a layered defence architecture specifically for narrow maritime chokepoints such as Hormuz. This system would combine plural defensive layers aimed at intercepting threats before they reach commercial traffic, such as naval escort groups protecting merchant convoys, counter-drone and missile interception systems aboard escort vessels, and coastal radar integration with aerial platforms closely monitoring the strait. By concentrating defensive capabilities along the narrow transit corridor of the Strait, such a system would address asymmetric threats, including mines, drones, missiles and fast-attack craft. Rather than dispersing naval forces, a layered defence would create a protected maritime corridor for commercial shipping during heightened tension periods. However, implementing such a system would require extensive coordination between Western navies and Gulf partners and sustained deployment of specialised assets such as mine-countermeasure vessels and air-defence destroyers.

Option 2: Persistent Maritime Domain Awareness Network

Iran's grey-zone tactics are thriving on ambiguity and deniability, particularly through small-craft harassment and dispersed missile platforms. A comprehensive maritime domain awareness (MDA) architecture could reduce this advantage by improving early attribution of suspicious maritime activity. This framework would be built upon surveillance sharing, including satellite monitoring of shipping lanes and intelligence platforms between coalition partners. Tech-powered maritime tracking tools could also help identify abnormal vessel behaviour before attacks occur. Recent operations provide a precedent for this approach. In response to Houthi attacks against merchant vessels in the Red Sea, the European Union launched EUNAVFOR ASPIDES in 2024 to strengthen maritime situational awareness through coordinated monitoring and information sharing among regional

partners. Similar mechanisms could be expanded in the Strait of Hormuz to improve coordination among Gulf operating naval forces. However, such systems also face limitations. Maritime domain awareness improves detection and attribution but cannot prevent attacks alone. Effective implementation also requires extensive data exchanges between regional states, which political sensitivities and differing strategic priorities may constrain.

Option 3: Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Coalition

While operational improvements can reduce the vulnerability of shipping, the Hormuz crisis also demonstrated the limits of exclusively betting on U.S. naval power to secure the Strait while Washington simultaneously manages strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. Given their dependence on Gulf energy flows, Indo-Pacific states should assume a greater role regarding maritime security operations in the region. Countries such as India, Japan and Australia possess capable naval forces and strong interests in maintaining open sea lanes connecting the Persian Gulf to Asian markets, and based on existing frameworks such as QUAD, could reinforce military integration in this matter. Expanding their participation in maritime patrols for instance would distribute the operational burden currently carried by Western navies while reinforcing deterrence against maritime disturbances. Such cooperation could evolve into a more structured maritime security coalition linking Gulf and Indo-Pacific partners, coordinating responses to chokepoint disruptions and developing a unique doctrine for responding to grey-zone maritime coercion. Nevertheless, geopolitical sensitivities and differing threat perceptions may limit the willingness of some states to participate directly in multilateral Gulf security campaigns.

Final Recommendation

Western maritime strategy in the Strait of Hormuz must evolve beyond traditional deterrence solely deriving from naval presence. The 2026 Iran war demonstrated that fleet deployments alone cannot prevent turmoil in narrow maritime chokepoints exposed to grey-zone coercion and asymmetric threats. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, an integrated maritime security architecture should be developed around three complementary pillars. First, a layered chokepoint defence system would provide direct protection to commercial shipping transiting the Strait. Second, maritime domain awareness networks would reduce the

ambiguity that enables grey-zone harassment by improving early detection, attribution and coordination among naval forces. Finally, greater participation by Indo-Pacific naval powers would distribute the operational burden currently borne by Western fleets while strengthening global naval deterrence.

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