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From Deterrence to Disruption: Maritime Implications of the Us-Iran Conflict for Security and Energy Flows Through Strategic Maritime Chokepoints

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ABSTRACT

The 2026 US-Iran confrontation revealed something important about the Persian Gulf: strategic competition there has moved well beyond traditional naval deterrence. What used to be straightforward transit routes for international commerce have become complex arenas where military signaling, economic pressure, and asymmetric operations all come together. Missile strikes, drone operations, cyber activities, and ongoing threats to commercial shipping have shown how localized maritime incidents can trigger global energy market disruptions and increase risks for international navigation. This article examines how the US-Iran rivalry has fundamentally changed the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints and reshaped the Gulf's regional security architecture. Using a qualitative explanatory case-study approach, the research argues that these waterways increasingly function as instruments of coercive statecraft, with profound implications for freedom of navigation, energy security, maritime insurance costs, and the strategic diversification of global energy supply routes.



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Introduction

Maritime dimension of the US-Iran rivalry has grown considerably in recent years. Strategic competition between the two states increasingly extends beyond conventional military confrontation. Traditional proxy wars and diplomatic maneuvers have gradually shifted to the maritime domain. Strategic maritime chokepoints, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, no longer function solely as commercial corridors. Instead, they have become contested spaces where military deterrence, asymmetric operations, economic coercion, and geopolitical ambitions all intersect.

The US-Iran conflict ranks among the longest-running geopolitical rivalries in modern Middle Eastern history. Since the 1979 revolution that brought the Islamic Republic to power, relations between Tehran and Washington have been marked by deep mistrust, competing regional visions, proxy warfare, military posturing, economic sanctions, and ideological hostility. The rivalry has ebbed and flowed over the decades, but it has never truly gone away.

The 2026 escalation between the two countries caught many observers off guard—not because tensions were unexpected, but because of how quickly events unfolded. Missile strikes, drone operations, naval deployments, cyber activities, and threats to commercial shipping disrupted maritime security in a matter of days. Global energy markets reacted almost instantly. The episode exposed vulnerability of critical sea lines of communication.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to various aspects of the US-Iran conflict—regional alliances, proxy warfare, nuclear negotiations—but the maritime dimension has received comparatively less systematic analysis. This gap is worth addressing, especially given how central the Gulf's waterways have become to the broader strategic competition.

This article investigates the maritime implications of the US-Iran conflict by examining its impact on strategic chokepoints, freedom of navigation,

energy security, and the evolving regional security architecture in the Persian Gulf. This competition reflects a transition from traditional deterrence toward maritime coercive disruption.

Classical deterrence, as scholars have long understood it, aims to prevent hostile action through the credible threat of retaliation and the preservation of strategic stability (Hashem, 2025). But contemporary maritime competition operates differently. It increasingly involves deliberate efforts to create uncertainty, impose economic costs, challenge commercial confidence, and manipulate perceptions of risk. The goal is not necessarily to win a naval battle but to make the other side's calculations more difficult and costly.

Attacks on commercial vessels, threats against shipping lanes, naval confrontations, and the deployment of unmanned systems all illustrate this shift. For Tehran, these strategies serve a clear purpose: offsetting American conventional superiority by exploiting geographical advantages and the inherent vulnerability of key chokepoints. The stakes extend well beyond military considerations. Energy security is arguably the most significant dimension of the US-Iran maritime rivalry. Many Asian and European economies remain heavily dependent on energy supplies transported through Middle Eastern maritime routes (International Energy Agency, 2025). Any significant disruption in the Strait of Hormuz would likely generate immediate volatility in global energy markets and expose deeper vulnerabilities within international economic systems.

Maritime security in the Gulf has thus become inseparable from broader debates about energy resilience, economic interdependence, and global strategic stability. This research examines the evolution of the maritime dimension of the US-Iran strategic rivalry and addresses a central question: how has the conflict transformed maritime chokepoints from mechanisms of economic connectivity into instruments of geopolitical coercion, and what are the implications for maritime security and global energy flows?

Using a qualitative explanatory case-study approach, the research finds that maritime chokepoints are no longer merely geographic transit corridors. They have increasingly become instruments of coercive statecraft—tools through which states can exert political and economic pressure without resorting to full-scale conventional warfare.

The securitization of Gulf waterways is reshaping the region's strategic environment in several important ways. It has raised operational risks for commercial shipping, driven up insurance and transportation costs, encouraged sustained naval deployments by external powers, and accelerated efforts by energy-importing and exporting states to diversify supply routes and reduce dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints. These developments suggest that the future of Gulf security will depend not just on the military balance between regional rivals, but also on the resilience of international maritime governance and the collective ability of states to safeguard the uninterrupted flow of global commerce and energy.

Historical Foundations of Maritime Threats in the Persian Gulf and its Surrounding Zone

a. The Tanker War

The maritime dimension of the US-Iran rivalry has deeper historical roots than many observers realize. The contemporary disputes over sanctions, nuclear policy, and regional influence are only the latest chapter in a longer story. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Persian Gulf emerged as a major theatre of maritime conflict as both sides sought to undermine each other's economic resilience by attacking oil tankers, ports, and offshore energy infrastructure (Eiran, 2026). The Tanker War (1984-1988) represented a significant escalation. It transformed commercial shipping into a legitimate strategic target and demonstrated that attacks on maritime trade could produce political and economic effects far beyond the immediate battlefield (Eiran, 2026). Neither Iran nor Iraq managed to secure decisive military advantages through these attacks. Instead, both sides focused on eroding each

other's war-fighting capacity by disrupting oil exports and threatening the free flow of maritime commerce.

As the conflict intensified, neutral merchant vessels and foreign-owned tankers increasingly found themselves in the crosshairs. Missile attacks, naval mines, and aerial strikes became routine. The growing risks to commercial shipping prompted external powers—particularly the United States—to take on a more active role in safeguarding maritime traffic and maintaining the uninterrupted flow of Gulf energy exports. The conflict's increasing internationalization underscored that regional security and global maritime trade stability were closely linked.

Operation Earnest Will (1987-1988) stands out as a turning point. Under this mission, the United States reflagged and escorted Kuwaiti oil tankers through the Persian Gulf. It was one of the largest naval protection operations undertaken by the US Navy since World War II (Cordesman & Wagner, 1990). More significantly, it established an enduring precedent: external powers would intervene militarily to preserve freedom of navigation, protect critical energy routes, and reassure global markets during periods of regional instability. The strategic lessons of the Tanker War continue to shape contemporary maritime security policies, particularly regarding the protection of the Strait of Hormuz and other critical sea lines of communication.

b. Post-2003 Regional Transformation

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of the Persian Gulf. By removing Saddam Hussein's regime, the invasion eliminated Iraq as a major regional counterweight to Iran. This shift deepened the strategic competition between Iran and the United States while simultaneously creating new geopolitical opportunities for Tehran.

As Iran expanded its political and security influence across Iraq and the wider Middle East, Washington responded by reinforcing its military partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, strengthening the US Fifth Fleet presence, expanding missile defense cooperation, and

intensifying maritime security initiatives to reassure regional allies (Kamrava, 2024).

Iran interpreted these moves as evidence of an expanding American containment strategy. Rather than pursue conventional naval parity with the United States—which would have been impossible given the vast resource and technological gaps—Tehran adopted a different approach. It developed a strategy designed to exploit the geographical characteristics of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. This approach emphasized Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities: fast attack craft, naval mines, anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial and maritime systems, and coastal defense networks capable of threatening commercial and military vessels operating in confined waterways.

Maritime competition thus became a central component of the broader US-Iran strategic rivalry. Iran's objective was not to defeat the United States in conventional naval warfare but to raise the operational, political, and economic costs of military intervention by creating persistent uncertainty in one of the world's most strategically significant maritime regions. This transformation laid the foundations for the contemporary pattern of maritime coercion, in which commercial shipping, strategic chokepoints, and energy infrastructure increasingly function as instruments of geopolitical competition rather than merely as passive elements of regional commerce.

The Persian Gulf as a Global Energy Hub

The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states possess some of the world's largest proven oil and natural gas reserves. For decades, they have been indispensable suppliers to major energy-importing economies in Asia, Europe, and North America. The stability of the Gulf thus carries implications that extend well beyond the region, affecting international energy prices, industrial production, inflation, and global economic growth.

Despite accelerating investment in renewable energy and decarbonization policies, the International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that Middle Eastern producers will remain central to

global energy security for decades. Sustained demand and the region's comparatively low production costs make it difficult to imagine a rapid shift away from Gulf energy supplies (International Energy Agency, 2023).

The Persian Gulf's importance, however, derives not just from its vast hydrocarbon reserves. It also serves as the principal maritime gateway through which a substantial proportion of the world's crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) is transported. This geographical dependence transforms maritime security into an integral component of energy security. Even limited disruptions to commercial navigation can generate disproportionate economic consequences. Recent crises have shown that missile attacks, vessel seizures, naval deployments, and heightened military tensions can increase freight charges, insurance premiums, and market volatility—even when oil exports continue to flow.

For this reason, the security of Gulf energy supplies has become a matter of international strategic concern rather than merely a regional economic issue. The uninterrupted movement of oil and LNG through Gulf maritime routes is a vital interest not only for the littoral states but also for major external stakeholders: The United States, China, Japan, South Korea, India, and the European Union. All these economies depend on reliable access to Gulf energy resources.

Technological advances, strategic petroleum reserves, and supply diversification have improved the resilience of global energy markets. But they have not eliminated the strategic significance of the Persian Gulf (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). The events of the 2026 US-Iran confrontation reaffirmed that even the perception of risk to the Strait of Hormuz can trigger immediate reactions in energy markets, shipping costs, and global supply chains. Protecting maritime energy corridors has thus become one of the defining dimensions of contemporary maritime security and geopolitical competition in the Gulf.

Strategic Maritime Chokepoints and the Gulf Security Environment

Strategic maritime chokepoints have long shaped the geopolitical and economic interactions of states. They concentrate global commerce within narrow, geographically constrained waterways. Unlike open sea lanes, chokepoints offer limited navigational alternatives, making them particularly vulnerable to disruption during periods of political tension or armed conflict.

Their strategic importance extends beyond physical geography. Chokepoints connect major production and consumption centers. They facilitate the movement of energy and commercial goods. And they provide states with opportunities to influence international trade and security. Control over—or the ability to threaten—these maritime corridors has thus become an important source of geopolitical leverage.

Three interrelated characteristics determine the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints (Corbett, 1911). First, geographical constraint limits vessel movement to narrow passages, creating natural bottlenecks that are difficult to bypass. Second, economic significance arises from the concentration of global trade and energy flows through these corridors, making uninterrupted navigation essential for international commerce. Third, strategic vulnerability stems from the fact that even limited military action, political instability, or the threat of disruption can produce consequences far beyond the immediate area—increasing transportation costs, raising insurance premiums, delaying supply chains, and generating uncertainty in global markets.

These characteristics create an enduring strategic paradox. The restricted geography of chokepoints makes them inherently vulnerable to interference. But that same vulnerability also enhances their political and military value. States lacking conventional naval superiority can exploit this vulnerability by threatening commercial shipping, disrupting maritime traffic, or signaling the capability to interrupt critical sea lines of communication. Coercive influence increasingly depends not on permanently controlling a

chokepoint but on creating sufficient uncertainty to alter the strategic calculations of adversaries and commercial actors alike.

The Persian Gulf and its surrounding waterways exemplify this dynamic more clearly than any other maritime region. Linked to the Arabian Sea through the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf functions as the principal outlet for hydrocarbon exports from the Gulf States. The concentration of energy infrastructure, commercial shipping, and military deployments has transformed the region into one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime environments. As dependence on maritime trade has increased and geopolitical competition has intensified, Gulf chokepoints have evolved from passive transit corridors into active arenas of strategic competition where military deterrence, economic security, and geopolitical influence increasingly intersect.

The US-Iran rivalry illustrates this transformation clearly. Rather than seeking decisive naval superiority, both states increasingly employ maritime spaces as instruments of strategic pressure. Naval deployments, sanctions enforcement, vessel interdictions, drone operations, cyber activities, and threats to commercial shipping have all expanded the strategic role of chokepoints beyond their traditional function as commercial gateways. The Strait of Hormuz has become not merely a geographical passage but a strategic instrument through which regional rivals seek to shape political behavior, influence global energy markets, and impose economic costs without crossing the threshold of full-scale conventional war.

Bab el-Mandeb and the Wider Maritime Security Environment

Though geographically distinct from the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait forms an integral part of the wider maritime security architecture linking the Persian Gulf with the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea. Situated between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea on the Horn of Africa, this narrow waterway serves as a critical

gateway connecting the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea.

As a principal artery of the Europe-Asia maritime corridor, Bab el-Mandeb facilitates the movement of containerized cargo, crude oil, LNG, and other strategic commodities between the Middle East, Europe, and global markets (Cohen, 2015). Its security has thus become inseparable from the stability of international trade and global supply chains.

The strategic importance of Bab el-Mandeb extends beyond its geographic location. Its close linkage with the Suez Canal makes it one of the world's most consequential maritime chokepoints. Disruption here can generate cascading effects across international shipping networks. Instability in and around the Strait threatens not only energy transportation but also commercial trade connecting Europe, Asia, and East Africa. Any interruption to maritime traffic compels vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, significantly increasing transit distances, voyage times, fuel consumption, freight charges, and insurance premiums while disrupting global supply chains.

The deterioration of maritime security in the Red Sea since late 2023—driven by Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and broader regional instability—illustrates how conflicts in one maritime theater can rapidly affect shipping far beyond the immediate area (International Maritime Organization, 2025). Many shipping companies temporarily diverted vessels from the Red Sea, while several naval coalitions expanded maritime security operations to protect commercial navigation. These developments demonstrated that threats to a single chokepoint can produce economic consequences across interconnected maritime corridors, affecting trade flows, energy markets, and the reliability of global logistics.

Bab el-Mandeb complements the analysis of the Strait of Hormuz by illustrating that strategic maritime chokepoints should not be viewed as isolated geographical entities. They are components of an interconnected maritime

security network. Disruptions in either waterway can amplify strategic uncertainty, reshape commercial shipping patterns, and increase the economic costs of international trade. The simultaneous instability witnessed in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb during the 2023-2026 period further demonstrates that contemporary maritime competition increasingly relies on the coercive manipulation of interconnected sea lines of communication rather than the physical closure of individual chokepoints. This evolving pattern reinforces the article's central argument that maritime spaces have become strategic instruments through which states and non-state actors seek to influence political behavior, impose economic costs, and reshape regional and global security dynamics.

The Strait of Hormuz and US-Iran Strategic Competition

For the United States, the Strait of Hormuz matters for several reasons: preserving freedom of navigation, safeguarding international commerce, and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of energy supplies. Successive US administrations have regarded secure access to Gulf sea lanes as essential to maintaining a stable international economic order (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). From Washington's perspective, a credible and continuous maritime presence serves both deterrent and stabilizing functions by discouraging interference with commercial shipping and reducing the likelihood of regional escalation.

Iran approaches the Strait from a markedly different strategic perspective. For Tehran, the concentration of US naval forces and expanding military cooperation between Washington and Gulf Arab states represents strategic encirclement and external pressure. Rather than seeking conventional naval superiority—a goal that would be unrealistic given the vast resource disparities—Iran has developed a maritime strategy centered on asymmetric deterrence that exploits the geographical characteristics of the Strait of Hormuz.

These contrasting strategic perspectives have transformed the Strait of Hormuz into more than a vital energy corridor. It has become an arena of continuous strategic signaling and coercive competition. The United States seeks to preserve an open maritime order based on freedom of navigation. Iran emphasizes strategic denial and deterrence through the credible threat of disruption (Levy et al., 2026). The strategic value of the Strait increasingly lies not in the permanent control of maritime space but in the capacity to influence political decision-making, shape commercial behavior, and affect global energy markets by creating uncertainty over the security of one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints.

The recurring maritime crises of 2023-2026 illustrate that contemporary competition in the Gulf is increasingly characterized by coercive disruption rather than conventional naval confrontation. This reinforces the article's central argument: maritime spaces have evolved into instruments of strategic statecraft (Levy et al., 2026).

Naval Balance in the Gulf Region

The naval balance in the Persian Gulf is defined by pronounced asymmetry. The United States retains overwhelming superiority in conventional naval warfare. Iran, by contrast, has developed an asymmetric maritime strategy designed to offset this imbalance by exploiting the Gulf's confined geography and the strategic vulnerability of maritime chokepoints. Competition in the Gulf is characterized less by the pursuit of decisive naval battles than by the interaction between American sea-control capabilities and Iran's sea-denial strategy.

The United States maintains one of the world's most capable expeditionary naval forces in the Gulf through the forward deployment of the US Fifth Fleet and supporting military infrastructure across the region. Its maritime posture combines advanced surface combatants, aircraft carrier strike groups, nuclear-powered submarines, long-range precision strike capabilities, integrated air and missile defense systems, and sophisticated

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets. Supported by extensive military facilities and defense partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, these capabilities enable the United States to project power, maintain freedom of navigation, protect commercial shipping, and respond rapidly to regional contingencies (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

Iran, by contrast, has adopted a strategy centered on sea denial rather than sea control. Recognizing the limitations of competing directly with the US Navy, Tehran has invested in capabilities designed to complicate military operations within the confined waters of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. These include coastal defense networks, anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, naval mines, fast attack craft employing swarm tactics, diesel-electric submarines, and increasingly sophisticated unmanned aerial and maritime systems (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). These capabilities are intended to impose operational, political, and economic costs on adversaries by threatening commercial navigation and creating uncertainty during periods of crisis.

The interaction between these contrasting maritime doctrines has produced a persistent security dilemma in the Gulf. The United States relies on sustained forward presence and technological superiority to preserve an open maritime order. Iran seeks to deter military intervention through the credible threat of disrupting strategically important sea lines of communication. As demonstrated during successive Gulf crises—particularly the escalation of 2026—this asymmetric naval balance has transformed maritime space into an arena of continuous strategic signaling, coercive pressure, and calibrated escalation. The effectiveness of each side's strategy increasingly depends not on achieving outright naval dominance but on shaping the strategic behavior of adversaries and commercial actors operating within one of the world's most critical maritime regions.

The Persian Gulf as a Contested Security Environment and Strategies of the Contending Parties

The Persian Gulf ranks among the world's most militarized and strategically contested maritime regions. The concentration of hydrocarbon resources, the presence of major maritime chokepoints, and the involvement of regional and extra-regional powers have transformed the Gulf into an arena where competing security visions and geopolitical interests intersect. The United States, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states pursue distinct strategic objectives that frequently reinforce mutual suspicion and strategic competition. Measures adopted by one actor to enhance its security are often interpreted by others as offensive, producing a persistent maritime security dilemma characterized by continuous military preparedness, strategic signaling, and periodic crises.

a. US Maritime Strategy in the Persian Gulf

The United States has traditionally pursued a sea-control strategy aimed at preserving an open and rules-based maritime order in the Persian Gulf. Successive US administrations have regarded the security of Gulf sea lanes as a strategic necessity because uninterrupted maritime commerce underpins international energy markets and global economic stability. American maritime strategy seeks to ensure freedom of navigation, protect commercial shipping, reassure regional allies, safeguard critical energy infrastructure, and deter actions that could threaten the stability of maritime trade or alter the regional balance of power (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

b. Iran's Asymmetric Maritime Strategy

Iran's maritime strategy rests on a simple but effective principle: a conventionally weaker naval power can offset technological disadvantages by exploiting geographical constraints and imposing disproportionate costs on a stronger adversary. Tehran has developed a sea-denial strategy designed to complicate military operations in the confined waters of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. This approach relies on the credible threat of disrupting maritime traffic, thereby

increasing the political, military, and economic costs of external intervention.

The geography of the Persian Gulf provides Iran with significant operational advantages (Levy et al., 2026). The short distance between Iran's coastline and major shipping lanes, the presence of strategically located islands, and extensive coastal missile coverage enable Iranian forces to monitor and influence maritime activity across much of the Gulf.

A defining feature of Iran's maritime doctrine is the employment of swarm tactics using numerous fast attack craft operating simultaneously against larger naval platforms. Though individual vessels have limited combat capability, their coordinated employment can complicate defensive responses, overwhelm surveillance systems, and increase operational uncertainty. The growing integration of unmanned systems has further expanded Iran's capacity to conduct persistent surveillance, precision strikes, and maritime harassment at comparatively low cost. Together, these capabilities provide Tehran with flexible instruments of coercion that support deterrence while remaining below the threshold of full-scale conventional conflict (Levy et al., 2026).

c. The GCC Security Vision

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states approach maritime security through the dual objectives of safeguarding national sovereignty and preserving the uninterrupted flow of regional commerce. Their security strategy places particular emphasis on protecting offshore energy infrastructure, securing maritime trade routes, countering Iranian influence, and maintaining close defense cooperation with external partners, especially the United States (Levy et al., 2026). GCC states generally support a sustained Western naval presence as an essential component of regional deterrence and maritime stability.

The competing maritime strategies have produced a complex and enduring security dilemma. The United States seeks to preserve freedom of navigation through conventional naval superiority and forward military deployment. Iran relies on asymmetric capabilities and sea-denial

tactics to deter perceived external threats. Meanwhile, the GCC states pursue collective security through external partnerships while simultaneously seeking to protect their economic prosperity and energy infrastructure. These

competing strategic approaches reinforce cycles of mistrust and military competition, transforming the Persian Gulf into a contested maritime space where deterrence, coercion, and strategic signaling coexist

Sea control

Sea denial

Conventional superiority

Asymmetric warfare

Global naval presence

Coastal Defence

Protection of shipping

Ability to disrupt shipping

Maritime Strategy of the US-Iran Conflict: From Deterrence to Disruption

The maritime dimension of the US-Iran rivalry illustrates a significant evolution in contemporary strategic competition. Traditional theories of maritime power have generally associated naval strategy with command of the sea, fleet engagements, and the protection of sea lines of communication. The strategic environment of the Persian Gulf, however, differs fundamentally from these classical assumptions. Rather than competing for permanent control of maritime space, the United States and Iran pursue contrasting strategies shaped by asymmetrical military capabilities, geographical constraints, and the strategic importance of global energy transportation. Maritime competition in the Gulf is increasingly characterized by calibrated coercion, persistent strategic signaling, and the manipulation of commercial vulnerabilities rather than conventional naval warfare (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

a. From Maritime Deterrence to Maritime Coercive Disruption

For decades, maritime deterrence in the Persian Gulf was primarily maintained through overwhelming American naval superiority. The forward deployment of carrier strike groups, guided-missile destroyers, submarines, and integrated surveillance systems was intended to discourage hostile actions by demonstrating the capability to respond decisively to any threat against commercial shipping or regional allies. This strategy reflected the classical deterrence model in which stability depended upon

maintaining credible military superiority and convincing potential adversaries that the costs of aggression would outweigh any anticipated gains.

The evolving character of maritime competition has, however, exposed the limitations of deterrence based solely on conventional naval dominance. The increasing use of missiles, drones, cyber capabilities, maritime militias, vessel interdictions, and attacks on commercial shipping demonstrates that strategically significant effects can be achieved without direct confrontation between major naval forces. Rather than seeking decisive military victory, contemporary maritime competition increasingly focuses on exploiting the economic and psychological vulnerabilities inherent in global maritime networks.

b. Emergence of Maritime Coercive Disruption

The US-Iran rivalry exemplifies this emerging pattern in which maritime space itself becomes an instrument of strategic coercion. Maritime coercive disruption is a strategy that seeks to generate political influence through the manipulation of commercial navigation and the perceived vulnerability of strategic sea lines of communication. Its principal characteristics include threatening commercial shipping, increasing uncertainty surrounding maritime routes, demonstrating the capability to interrupt energy transportation, exploiting the geographical constraints of strategic chokepoints, and employing asymmetric capabilities—anti-ship missiles, naval mines, unmanned systems, cyber operations, and fast attack craft—to impose disproportionate costs on conventionally superior adversaries.

Iran's maritime strategy illustrates this approach clearly. Rather than attempting to defeat the United States in conventional naval warfare, Tehran seeks to preserve a credible capacity to disrupt maritime traffic at strategically significant moments. Even limited incidents involving commercial vessels, temporary shipping interruptions, or heightened perceptions of risk can increase insurance premiums, raise freight rates, alter commercial shipping patterns, and contribute to volatility in international energy markets (The White House, 2025). The strategic objective is therefore not the permanent closure of the Strait of Hormuz but the maintenance of a credible threat capable of influencing the political calculations of regional governments, external powers, and global commercial actors.

The ongoing maritime crises demonstrate that contemporary strategic competition increasingly revolves around the management of uncertainty rather than the exercise of permanent territorial or naval control. The ability to create disruption within globally interconnected maritime networks has become a source of strategic leverage in its own right. The concept of maritime coercive disruption provides a more appropriate analytical framework for understanding the evolving dynamics of the US-Iran rivalry than traditional models centered exclusively on deterrence, sea control, or conventional naval superiority.

Militarization of Choke Points: Implications for Regional Security

The militarization of maritime chokepoints carries several significant consequences. First, it increases the possibility of accidental escalation. Dense military deployments create risks of miscalculation and unintended confrontation. Second, it encourages external intervention. Because Gulf maritime security affects global energy markets, outside powers have incentives to maintain presence in the region. Third, it transforms economic routes into security arenas. Commercial shipping increasingly operates within a politically contested environment. Finally, it contributes to a broader transformation of Middle

Eastern security architecture, where maritime competition increasingly complements traditional land-based rivalries (The White House, 2025).

a. Effects on the International Energy Market

Attacks on infrastructure and shipping, along with incidents involving the seizure or detention of commercial vessels, have become an important feature of US-Iran maritime tensions. Such incidents demonstrate how commercial shipping can become entangled with broader geopolitical disputes. Even limited incidents create wider effects: increased shipping risks, higher insurance costs, military escorts, and market uncertainty.

Incidents involving attacks on commercial vessels in the Gulf and Gulf of Oman have shown just how vulnerable maritime trade routes really are. Regardless of attribution disputes, such events contribute to perceptions of insecurity and influence commercial decision-making (International Energy Agency, 2026).

b. Effects on Freedom of Navigation

Freedom of navigation represents one of the fundamental principles of international maritime order. The US considers maintaining open sea lanes essential for global commerce and international stability. However, the US-Iran rivalry challenges this principle in ways that create a maritime environment where legal freedom of navigation exists theoretically but is constrained by strategic realities:

- **Militarization of Commercial Spaces:** Commercial shipping increasingly operates within areas of military competition.
- **Strategic Ambiguity:** Uncertainty regarding potential attacks influences shipping behavior.
- **Legal and Political Disputes:** Different interpretations of maritime rights and security responsibilities create tensions.

c. Effects on Oil Transportation and Global Markets

The global oil market is highly sensitive to geopolitical instability because energy prices are influenced not only by actual supply disruptions but also by expectations regarding future risks. A

maritime confrontation between the United States and Iran can affect oil markets through higher transportation costs, market uncertainty, and speculative price fluctuations (International Energy Agency, 2026). Even limited incidents can produce economic effects because energy markets respond rapidly to perceived threats.

d. Shipping Costs and Economic Consequences

Maritime insecurity affects commercial shipping by increasing operational risks. Shipping companies respond to heightened threats, which drives up the overall cost of international trade (UN Trade and Development, 2026).

e. Insurance Premiums

One of the immediate economic consequences of maritime tensions is increased insurance costs. When maritime routes are perceived as dangerous, insurers raise premiums to compensate for higher risks. These costs eventually affect energy prices, consumer markets, and global transportation networks. Even without physical interruption of shipping, geopolitical tensions can generate significant economic consequences.

f. Supply Chain Disruptions and Global Trade

Modern global economies depend on integrated supply chains where disruptions in one region can affect production and distribution worldwide. The US-Iran maritime confrontation creates risks for the global supply chain, particularly for energy supplies (UN Trade and Development, 2026).

Discussion of Major Findings

a. Transformation from Deterrence to Disruption

The first major finding of this study is that the maritime dimension of the US-Iran conflict has evolved well beyond the traditional deterrence. Classical maritime deterrence depends on military capability, credibility and strategic signaling. But contemporary Gulf maritime competition follows a different logic. Actors increasingly seek to influence opponents by creating uncertainty and imposing indirect costs rather than by threatening direct military retaliation.

Iran's maritime strategy illustrates this transformation well. Tehran simply doesn't have the conventional naval capacity to challenge the United States through traditional fleet warfare. Instead, it relies on asymmetric capabilities designed to threaten maritime operations and increase the costs of confrontation. The objective isn't necessarily permanent control of maritime space. It's the ability to create disruption when required.

This trend suggests that maritime power in contemporary conflicts is increasingly measured not just by the ability to control the sea but also by the ability to deny, disrupt, and complicate an adversary's operations.

b. Strategic Chokepoints as Instruments of Geopolitical Power

Another important finding is that maritime chokepoints have evolved from geographical features into strategic instruments of power. The Strait of Hormuz exemplifies this transformation. Its significance doesn't come only from the volume of energy passing through it. It also stems from its vulnerability to political and military competition.

Chokepoints provide strategic leverage because they create vulnerability for dependent actors and allow relatively weaker states to influence stronger powers. This explains why Iran attaches such strategic importance to its geographical position. The ability to threaten maritime disruption gives Tehran bargaining power that its conventional military capabilities alone would not provide. At the same time, the United States views the protection of these waterways as essential for maintaining international order and economic stability. Maritime chokepoints thus function simultaneously as economic corridors, military spaces, political instruments, and strategic bargaining tools.

c. Maritime Security and Energy Security Are Interconnected

A third finding is about inseparable nature of the maritime security and energy security. Insecurity in Gulf maritime routes affects global energy systems through market uncertainty, higher

transportation costs, and potential supply disruptions.

The importance of maritime routes means that even limited incidents can produce global consequences. This finding challenges approaches that treat energy security primarily as a question of resource availability. In reality, energy security depends equally on the security of transportation networks through which resources reach international markets. Maritime stability has thus become a fundamental component of global economic security.

d. Asymmetric Maritime Strategies and Strategic Balance

A fourth finding concerns the role of asymmetric maritime warfare. The US-Iran rivalry demonstrates that technological superiority does not automatically guarantee complete maritime dominance. The United States possesses overwhelming conventional naval advantages, but Iran's geographic position and asymmetric capabilities provide alternative sources of strategic influence.

Iran's approach reflects a broader transformation in military strategy where weaker actors seek to exploit vulnerabilities rather than competing directly. The Persian Gulf environment favors such strategies because commercial shipping routes are concentrated, making coastal missile systems and smaller platforms capable of challenging naval movement. Strategic advantage in maritime conflicts depends not only on fleet size but also on geography, technology, doctrine, and political objectives.

Conclusion

The US-Iran conflict has fundamentally transformed strategic maritime chokepoints. The passive geographic corridors have become active instruments of geopolitical competition. The evolution from deterrence to disruption reflects changing patterns of contemporary security competition, where states seek influence not only through military superiority but also through the ability to create uncertainty and economic

pressure. Maritime chokepoints have thus become arenas where military power, economic interests, and political influence intersect.

This study has argued that the maritime rivalry between the United States and Iran reflects a transition from deterrence toward disruption. While the United States relies on conventional naval superiority and freedom of navigation principles, Iran employs asymmetric maritime strategies designed to exploit geographical advantages and impose strategic costs.

The consequences of this rivalry extend far beyond the Persian Gulf. Because global energy markets and international trade depend heavily on secure maritime routes, instability in strategic chokepoints represents a challenge to global economic security.

The concept of maritime coercive disruption provides a useful framework for understanding how contemporary actors use maritime vulnerability as an instrument of geopolitical influence. It suggests that future conflicts may increasingly occur not through direct military confrontation but through attempts to control uncertainty, risk, and access within critical maritime spaces.

Maintaining stability in the Gulf requires balancing deterrence with diplomacy, military preparedness with confidence-building measures, and national interests with international maritime cooperation. The future of Middle Eastern security will depend significantly on whether strategic waterways remain arenas of confrontation or evolve into spaces of managed competition and cooperative security.

Maritime insecurity affects global markets through multiple mechanisms comprising energy price volatility, increased shipping costs, higher insurance premiums, and supply chain uncertainty. The consequences extend beyond the Middle East, affecting major economies such as China, India, Japan, South Korea, and European states.

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