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Conflict at the Crossroads: Security Tensions in the Strait of Hormuz

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Abstract:
The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the most critical maritime chokepoints in the world, shaping regional and global security. This article explores the geostrategic importance of the strait, its influence on energy markets, and the tensions arising from Iran – U.S. rivalry. It examines the role of regional states and external powers in safeguarding maritime security while balancing competing interests. The discussion highlights how disruptions in oil and gas transit affect global markets, alongside the strategies employed by Gulf states, the U.S., China, and Russia. Special attention is given to incidents such as tanker seizures, naval clashes, and asymmetric warfare that have increased risks of escalation. The article also assesses international legal frameworks and explores the role of multilateral initiatives in reducing conflict. Finally, it argues that greater cooperation, regional confidence-building, and legal mechanisms are essential to balance Iran's sovereignty with the global need for uninterrupted trade. The analysis provides a roadmap for understanding how security, diplomacy, and law intersect at this vital maritime corridor.

Keywords: Strait of Hormuz, maritime chokepoint, energy security, Iran–U.S. tensions, Gulf security, UNCLOS, oil transit, multilateral cooperation, naval strategy, international law.

Literature Review:
Scholarly works on the Strait of Hormuz emphasise its role as a strategic maritime chokepoint where nearly one-fifth of the world's oil passes daily, making it a focal point for energy security studies. Research by Cordesman and Toukan highlights the vulnerability of oil markets to disruptions in the strait, stressing the potential for global price shocks during crises. Scholars such as Gause and Katz analyse the regional security dilemma, showing how Iran's military posture and U.S. naval presence create cycles of escalation and deterrence. Other works examine Gulf states' security strategies, including investment in naval capabilities and diversification of export routes through pipelines. Recent studies explore China's and Russia's growing involvement, framing it within broader debates on multipolarity and great-power competition in maritime security. Legal scholarship also examines the application of international maritime law, particularly UNCLOS, to navigation rights and disputes in the strait. Meanwhile, policy analyses from think tanks such as the International Crisis Group and Chatham House stress the importance of multilateral cooperation and confidence-building measures to prevent conflict escalation. Together, this body of literature shows that the Strait of Hormuz is not only an energy artery but also a geopolitical hotspot shaped by overlapping military, economic, and legal concerns.

INTRODUCTION

The Strait of Hormuz is called a global maritime chokepoint because of its narrow geography and high importance for global trade. At its narrowest, the passage is only 33 kilometers wide, and all ships must follow strict lanes for entry and exit. This limited space makes it easy to control or disrupt. The strait connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea, meaning that most of the oil and gas exported from Gulf countries must pass through it. For this reason, it is described as a "lifeline" for the global economy. The United States Energy Information Administration (EIA) identifies the Strait of Hormuz as the most important oil transit chokepoint in the world. Any disruption, even for a short time, can push oil prices higher and disturb shipping flows. This vulnerability makes it a major concern for both exporters and importers of energy. Countries in Asia, like India, China, and Japan, depend heavily on Gulf oil passing through this strait. At the same time, Western economies and industries also rely on stable flows of oil and gas. Because of this, the security of the strait has become an international issue rather than just a regional one. Major naval powers, including the United States and its allies, keep a military presence in the Gulf to secure the waterway. Iran, on the other hand, often uses the strait as a tool of leverage in its disputes with Western powers. Thus, the narrowness, heavy traffic, and global dependence make the Strait of Hormuz the most critical maritime chokepoint in the world.

The Strait of Hormuz has gained importance over time because of repeated conflicts in the Gulf region. Each major war or crisis has shown how vulnerable the waterway is and why it matters for global security. During the Iran – Iraq War (1980 – 1988), both countries attacked oil tankers passing through the Gulf in what became known as the "Tanker War". Hundreds of ships were targeted, and global oil prices rose sharply. This crisis forced the United States and other powers to deploy naval forces to protect shipping, proving that the strait's security directly affects world energy markets. In 1990 – 91, the Gulf War again brought attention to the strait. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and threats against Saudi Arabia raised fears of disruptions in oil supplies. The U.S. led coalition ensured that the Strait of Hormuz remained open, highlighting its role as a route that must be secured in any regional conflict. Similarly, after the 2003 U.S.

invasion of Iraq, insurgency and instability in the Gulf reinforced the strait's importance as a lifeline for energy exports. Tensions between Iran and Western states over nuclear issues have linked directly to the strait. Iranian officials have repeatedly threatened to close it in response to sanctions or military pressure. This strategy underlines how Iran views the strait as a powerful bargaining tool. Incidents like the seizure of foreign tankers in 2019 showed how quickly tensions could escalate into international crises. These conflicts have given the Strait of Hormuz a reputation as a "flashpoint." Its security is no longer just a regional issue but a central concern for global powers. Each conflict has made governments more aware that keeping this passage open is critical for economic and political stability worldwide.

The Strait of Hormuz is the world's busiest energy transit route. Every day, around 20 – 21 million barrels of oil move through the strait, which equals nearly 20 – 25% of global oil consumption. Along with oil, about 25 – 30% of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) also passes through this narrow waterway, mostly from Qatar. These numbers make the strait the single most important chokepoint in the global energy system. The importance of these figures lies in how dependent the world economy is on Gulf energy. Asia is the largest importer, with countries like China, India, Japan, and South Korea relying heavily on oil and gas from the Gulf. The European Union and the United States are less dependent, but disruptions still affect them because oil and gas are traded globally, and any crisis pushes up prices everywhere. Disruptions in the strait have immediate effects. During the Iran–Iraq "Tanker War" in the 1980s, oil prices spiked, even when physical supplies were not fully cut. In more recent times, even threats by Iran to close the strait have caused price volatility. Insurance costs for tankers increase quickly in times of tension, adding to the global burden. Because oil markets are interconnected, a crisis in the strait can raise fuel costs for households, industries, and governments worldwide. This dependence has also pushed many countries to search for alternatives. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have built pipelines to export oil through the Red Sea or Arabian Sea, bypassing the strait. However, these alternatives cannot carry the full volume of exports. This means the Strait of Hormuz will remain essential for the world's energy security for the foreseeable future. Its role as a corridor for one-fifth of global energy trade explains why every regional crisis attracts global concern.

Regional states view the Strait of Hormuz as vital to their security and wealth. Iran sees the strait as both a defensive space and a source of leverage against rivals. Iran has negotiating leverage in regional conflicts because Tehran signals it can obstruct passage if forced through naval exercises and threats. Iran's viewpoints reflect its need to protect exports and deter foreign intervention. Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE treat the strait as an economic lifeline. Their oil revenues depend on safe passage through the waterway. These states invest in naval forces and in coastal security to protect tankers and ports. They also build pipelines that bypass the strait partly to reduce risk. Such alternatives, however, cannot replace the full capacity of the strait, so these countries still depend on it heavily. Oman takes a different approach. Muscat prefers calm and acts as a mediator when tensions rise. Oman's geography gives it a direct interest in keeping shipping open and stable. Qatar also focuses on protecting its LNG exports, since a large share of its gas leaves through nearby waters. Smaller Gulf states balance ties between Iran and Western powers. They fear that conflict in the strait would harm their economies. Thus, many Gulf leaders favour diplomatic de-escalation even while they strengthen defences. In short, regional states all see the strait as central to survival, income, and diplomacy. Yet they differ on tactics: Iran leans on coercion, Gulf monarchies on defence and alternatives, and Oman on mediation and stability.

The Strait of Hormuz shapes major powers' strategies in several clear ways. The United States treats the strait as a core interest. Washington keeps a strong naval presence in the Gulf to ensure free passage and

to reassure allies. U.S. policy mixes deterrence, patrols, and partnerships with Gulf states to prevent blockages or attacks. China sees the strait as essential to its energy security. Beijing imports large volumes of Gulf oil and gas, so it seeks stable sea lanes. China has expanded diplomatic and economic ties with Gulf states. It also increased naval deployments to the wider region to protect sea trade. These moves reflect China's effort to secure supply lines without direct confrontation with the United States. Russia views the strait as a strategic lever in broader great-power politics. Moscow is less dependent on Gulf oil, but it watches U.S. influence in the area carefully. Russia often supports regional actors that counterbalance the U.S. presence and uses diplomacy to gain influence in Gulf affairs. All three powers also use the strait as a bargaining chip in wider diplomacy. Crises there raise oil prices and test world markets; this gives outside powers reasons to intervene, mediate, or pressure regional actors.

Role of Iran and USA:

Iran has long viewed the Strait of Hormuz as a powerful bargaining tool in its foreign policy. The country's location on the northern shore of the strait gives it significant control over one side of the passage. This geography allows Tehran to remind the world that it can disrupt energy flows if threatened. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian leaders have repeatedly signaled that closing or disrupting the strait is a possible response to U.S. pressure or sanctions. These statements are rarely acted upon fully but serve as a form of deterrence. The mere possibility of closure influences international markets and raises insurance costs for shipping. During the Iran – Iraq War in the 1980s, Iran targeted oil tankers passing through the Gulf as part of its strategy to weaken Iraq's allies, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This period, known as the "Tanker War," showed how Iran could use the strait to challenge opponents indirectly. Since then, threats to close the strait have become a common tool whenever Iran faces sanctions or diplomatic isolation. For example, during the U.S. push for sanctions on Iran's nuclear program in the 2010s, Iranian officials warned that no oil would flow through the strait if Iranian exports were blocked. This leverage works because the world depends heavily on Gulf energy. By highlighting its ability to disrupt global oil markets, Iran gains a bargaining chip in negotiations. Even when it does not act, the uncertainty strengthens Iran's position. In this way, the Strait of Hormuz acts as a form of "geopolitical currency" for Iran, giving it influence that extends far beyond its borders.

Iran's military strategy in the Strait of Hormuz is built around deterrence and asymmetric warfare. Instead of matching the United States' advanced navy ship-for-ship, Iran focuses on using smaller, cheaper, and more mobile forces. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) plays a central role. It relies on fast attack craft, speedboats, and armed drones to harass or swarm larger naval vessels. These tactics aim to make U.S. and allied warships vulnerable in narrow waters. Iran has also developed a strong missile and mine-laying capability. Coastal anti-ship missiles can target tankers and warships passing through the strait. Sea mines are another low-cost weapon that could disrupt traffic and increase risks for shipping companies. Submarines, particularly small diesel-powered ones, add another layer of threat, as they can operate quietly in shallow Gulf waters. Another feature of Iran's strategy is the use of threats to close the strait during political crises. Such threats often coincide with periods of international pressure, such as U.S. sanctions on Iran's nuclear program. Even without acting, these statements raise global oil prices and highlight Iran's leverage. In recent years, Iran has also integrated drones and cyber capabilities into its approach. Drone surveillance allows for close monitoring of shipping, while cyberattacks can disrupt navigation systems. These strategies reflect Iran's attempt to compensate for weaker conventional forces through creativity and flexibility.

The United States has responded to Iran's threats in the Strait of Hormuz by maintaining a strong military presence in the Gulf for decades. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, patrols the area and ensures freedom of navigation. Its presence deters Iran from taking large-scale actions against commercial or military ships. Aircraft carriers, destroyers, and submarines are regularly deployed to show U.S. readiness. In addition to its direct presence, the U.S. has built alliances with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain. These states provide bases and logistical support for U.S. operations. Joint military exercises, like mine-clearing drills and maritime patrols, are conducted regularly to prepare for possible Iranian disruptions. The U.S. has also worked with international partners to protect shipping. Initiatives like the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) coordinate naval forces from multiple countries to patrol the strait and escort tankers when necessary. Economic tools such as sanctions are another aspect of U.S. strategy, aiming to pressure Iran while maintaining a deterrent military presence. These measures show that Washington treats the Strait of Hormuz as a vital interest. By combining military strength with alliances, the U.S. ensures that no single country, including Iran, can close the passage without facing serious consequences.

Several high-profile incidents in the Strait of Hormuz highlight the risks created by Iran – U.S. tensions. During the Iran – Iraq War in the 1980s, oil tankers were attacked in what became known as the "Tanker War," drawing the U.S. into direct naval confrontations with Iran. In 1988, the U.S. launched Operation Praying Mantis after an American warship was damaged by an Iranian mine. The clash sank or damaged several Iranian vessels. More recently, tensions resurfaced in 2019 after the U.S. withdrew from the nuclear deal and imposed sanctions on Iran. That year, Iranian forces seized oil tankers flagged to Western allies, including the British tanker Stena Impero. The U.S. also accused Iran of attacking tankers near the Gulf of Oman with mines or drones. Drone incidents have also raised tensions. In June 2019, Iran shot down a U.S. surveillance drone, claiming it violated its airspace. Washington considered retaliatory strikes but pulled back at the last moment. Naval harassment by Iranian fast boats, which often come dangerously close to U.S. ships, continues to be a regular flashpoint. These incidents demonstrate how quickly tensions in the strait can escalate. Even without full-scale war, smaller confrontations can spark global concerns about oil security and regional stability.

Despite hostile rhetoric, both Iran and the U.S. use informal mechanisms to avoid full-scale conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. One method is the use of backchannel diplomacy, often mediated by third countries such as Oman, Switzerland, or Qatar. These states host secret talks or pass messages to reduce risks of miscalculation. For example, Oman has frequently acted as a mediator during nuclear negotiations and maritime crises. Military-to-military communication is another important tool. Even though official ties are weak, naval forces sometimes use international radio protocols to avoid accidental collisions or escalation. Such professional exchanges are limited but important in a crowded waterway. International organizations also play a role. The United Nations and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) encourage both sides to respect freedom of navigation. While not always successful, these frameworks create pressure to resolve crises peacefully. Finally, indirect deterrence helps prevent escalation. Both Iran and the U.S. understand that a full blockade or war in the strait would damage their own interests as much as their rivals. For Iran, closure would cut off its own oil exports. For the U.S., open conflict could drag it into another costly Middle East war. This shared awareness pushes both sides to rely on threats, limited actions, and negotiations rather than major war.

Influence on global energy security:

The world's busiest energy chokepoint is the Strait of Hormuz. Approximately 20 to 21 million barrels of crude oil, or roughly one-fifth of the world's total consumption, flow through it daily on average. Significant amounts of liquefied natural gas (LNG) are also transported via the strait; in fact, about 30% of all LNG exports worldwide pass through these seas. The major importers of this oil and gas include Asian countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea, which rely heavily on Gulf energy supplies to meet their growing industrial and domestic demand. European states also import oil and LNG through this passage, though to a lesser extent compared to Asia. The dependence is so high that even small disturbances in traffic through the strait create concerns among energy importers. The United States, while reducing its direct reliance due to domestic shale production, remains indirectly vulnerable because global oil prices are shaped by disruptions in this region. Thus, the sheer volume of oil and LNG passing daily through the Strait of Hormuz highlights its central role in sustaining the global economy and explains why it is constantly at the center of international debates on energy security.

Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz quickly create uncertainty in global oil and gas markets. Because so much of the world's energy passes through this narrow route, any threat of closure or attack on tankers leads to immediate price increases. More recently, incidents such as the 2019 attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and the seizure of vessels by Iran sent oil prices higher within days. The impact is not only on crude prices but also on insurance premiums, freight costs, and the stability of supply chains that depend on timely deliveries. Countries with high import dependence, such as Japan and India, face inflationary pressures when energy costs rise suddenly. Even the United States, though less reliant on Gulf oil, experiences market volatility because crude is a globally traded commodity and U.S. prices are tied to world benchmarks. Thus, any disruption whether real, threatened, or even rumored has ripple effects across the global economy, underlining the extreme vulnerability of energy security to events in this chokepoint.

Several alternatives have been developed to reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, but they remain limited in capacity. The main option is the East – West Pipeline in Saudi Arabia, also known as the Petroline, which carries about 5 million barrels per day from the eastern oil fields to the Red Sea coast. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) also built the Habshan–Fujairah pipeline that bypasses the strait and transports crude directly to the Arabian Sea, with a capacity of around 1.5 million barrels per day. Qatar has almost no alternative, and its LNG exports depend almost fully on the strait. Iraq's pipeline to Turkey offers some relief but faces technical and security issues. Compared to the 20 million barrels that flow through Hormuz daily, these bypass routes cover only a fraction of the volume. This means that while they provide some buffer in times of crisis, they cannot fully replace the strait's role. Moreover, building new routes faces political, financial, and environmental challenges. As a result, the Strait of Hormuz continues to be an unavoidable energy artery, and bypass routes can only act as supplementary options in emergencies.

Energy importing states have developed strategies to manage their exposure to the risks of the Strait of Hormuz. Japan and South Korea maintain strategic petroleum reserves to cover several months of imports in case of disruption. China has built large national reserves and has also diversified its import sources, though it still relies heavily on Gulf suppliers. India has created reserves but on a smaller scale compared to Japan and China, making it more vulnerable to shocks. The European Union (EU) relies less on Gulf energy compared to Asia but still monitors security risks closely because disruptions affect global prices,

which influence European economies. Many of these countries also pursue diplomatic engagement with Gulf states and international organizations to encourage stability in the region. They support international naval patrols and cooperative frameworks to ensure safe passage through the strait. Despite these measures, the heavy reliance of Asia on Gulf oil and gas means that no amount of planning can fully shield these countries from risks in this chokepoint.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), dominated by Gulf producers, plays an important role in stabilising oil markets when tensions rise in the Strait of Hormuz. OPEC members, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, often pledge to increase production or use their spare capacity to calm markets when disruptions occur. Gulf oil diplomacy also extends beyond OPEC through bilateral agreements with key importers like China, India, and Japan, which are designed to guarantee steady flows and build long-term partnerships. These efforts are partly aimed at reducing the panic that often follows strait crises. However, OPEC's ability to stabilize markets is not unlimited, as sudden disruptions or blockades could overwhelm its spare capacity. Moreover, geopolitical rivalries among member states, including tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, sometimes complicate collective decision-making. Despite these challenges, OPEC and Gulf diplomacy remain crucial tools for reducing the impact of Hormuz-related tensions on the global energy system.

Strategies adopted to secure the Strait of Hormuz:

The Gulf states have adopted different military and diplomatic strategies to secure their maritime zones in the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have invested heavily in modern naval and air defense systems to protect their oil shipping routes. The UAE's naval modernisation program includes advanced patrol vessels and maritime surveillance systems, while Saudi Arabia relies on its naval bases on both the Persian Gulf and Red Sea coasts to provide a strategic buffer. Oman, which controls the southern side of the strait, has taken a neutral diplomatic stance by maintaining good relations with both Iran and Western countries. Its neutrality allows it to act as a mediator in times of crisis, while also ensuring that its waters remain relatively stable. Qatar, with its large liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, focuses on securing tankers through cooperation with allies, including the U.S., and by strengthening its maritime patrols. Collectively, these states also cooperate through regional security forums and bilateral defense agreements with Western powers. However, despite these efforts, their naval capabilities remain limited compared to Iran's asymmetric warfare strategies in the Gulf. Thus, Gulf states rely heavily on partnerships with the U.S. and Europe for protection against threats in the Strait of Hormuz.

The U.S. has maintained a permanent military presence in the Gulf since the late 20th century, mainly to secure energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, is central to operations in the region and regularly conducts patrols, freedom of navigation operations, and joint exercises with Gulf partners. This presence aims to deter Iran from threatening shipping lanes and reassure allies like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar of U.S. security commitments. U.S. alliances with regional actors are also critical. Defense agreements allow the U.S. to use bases in Bahrain, Qatar (Al Udeid Air Base), and the UAE. These partnerships increase U.S. flexibility in projecting power across the Gulf. However, the U.S. presence is sometimes criticised for fueling tensions with Iran, which views it as an encirclement strategy. The impact of this presence is significant. It has prevented large-scale disruptions to oil flows despite repeated crises, including tanker seizures and drone incidents. Yet, reliance on U.S. forces has also created dependency among Gulf states, limiting their ability to act independently in maritime defense.

China and Russia have developed different approaches to security in the Strait of Hormuz, shaped by their geopolitical interests. China, as the largest importer of Gulf oil, views the strait primarily through the lens of energy security. While it avoids direct military involvement, China has increased its naval presence in nearby waters, participated in joint exercises with Iran, and signed long-term energy and infrastructure agreements with Gulf states. Beijing promotes a multilateral security framework, calling for dialogue among regional actors instead of reliance on U.S. dominance. Russia, on the other hand, seeks to challenge U.S. influence by aligning closely with Iran and offering arms sales and military cooperation. Moscow has conducted joint naval drills with Iran in the Gulf and supported proposals for collective security arrangements that reduce U.S. dominance. Russia also sees Gulf instability as an opportunity to expand its energy exports, as disruptions in Hormuz can raise global oil prices, benefiting Russian revenues. Both China and Russia use diplomatic and economic tools rather than large-scale military commitments. However, their growing engagement signals a shift toward multipolar involvement in Gulf security, challenging the U.S. centered order.

Multinational Initiatives:

The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), launched in 2019 and led by the U.S., aims to protect shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman. Members include the U.K., Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, among others. The initiative conducts surveillance, escorts commercial vessels, and shares intelligence among participants. Its main purpose is to ensure collective action against threats like piracy, terrorism, and Iranian disruptions of tanker traffic. Other multinational efforts, such as European led maritime awareness missions, also contribute to security. France, for example, established a naval mission based in Abu Dhabi to coordinate European contributions. Japan and South Korea have deployed their own naval assets for independent but cooperative operations. The impact of these initiatives is mixed. While they provide greater coordination and reduce the burden on individual states, Iran views them as hostile, claiming they increase militarization of the Gulf. Moreover, the absence of China and Russia limits their global legitimacy. Nevertheless, they represent an important attempt to internationalise Gulf security rather than leaving it solely to U.S. forces.

Economic sanctions, arms deals, and energy partnerships play a central role in shaping power balances in the Strait of Hormuz. U.S. sanctions on Iran, especially after 2018, have weakened its oil exports but encouraged Tehran to use the strait as leverage in negotiations. Iran's threats to close the strait often arise when sanctions tighten, showing the link between economic pressure and maritime security. Arms deals are another major factor. Gulf states are among the world's largest arms importers, purchasing advanced aircraft, missile systems, and naval equipment mainly from the U.S. and European suppliers. These purchases not only strengthen their defense capabilities but also deepen security partnerships with Western powers. Energy partnerships further shape dynamics. China and India have long-term energy contracts with Gulf producers, making them stakeholders in stability. Meanwhile, Gulf producers use oil diplomacy, adjusting production to manage prices during crises. These strategies allow Gulf states to maintain leverage over consumer nations. Thus, economic measures and defense ties are as critical as military presence in determining power balances in the Strait of Hormuz. They influence both deterrence and vulnerability in this key chokepoint.

UNCLOS treats straits used for international navigation differently from ordinary territorial seas. For such straits, UNCLOS provides the regime of "transit passage." Transit passage allows ships and aircraft of all states, commercial and military, to pass through continuously and expeditiously without prior permission

from coastal states, so long as they do not engage in activities harmful to the coastal state. Transit passage rights are meant to keep vital sea lanes open while balancing coastal state security. At the same time, coastal states retain some law-enforcement powers inside their territorial sea, for example to prevent and punish pollution or to enforce customs and immigration laws, but these powers must not impede transit passage. The Strait of Hormuz fits the legal test for many users because it links the high seas and exclusive economic zones and serves as a route for international navigation; therefore, the dominant legal view is that transit passage applies and cannot lawfully be blocked by a coastal state. However, legal complexity arises because key states in the region, and some major powers, have not ratified UNCLOS or interpret parts of it differently, creating a gap between legal rules and political practice. This gap means that, while the law is clear on transit rights, enforcement depends on diplomatic and naval measures rather than automatic legal remedies.

Formal legal cases specifically about closing or blocking the Strait of Hormuz have been rare. When maritime disputes arise, states more often use diplomacy, security measures, or international pressure rather than bringing cases to courts. In the 1980s "Tanker War," the main responses were naval escorts and diplomatic protests rather than court rulings. More recently, incidents like tanker seizures have led to flag-state protests, UN statements, and bilateral talks rather than sustained adjudication in international courts. The UN Security Council and other bodies sometimes condemn unlawful seizures or attacks and call for release of vessels and crews, but enforcement remains political and limited. Academic and legal commentators also note that coastal states might try to justify restrictive measures under certain narrow safety or security exceptions in UNCLOS, but such claims risk international backlash and may not stand before an international tribunal. In short, disputes around the Strait of Hormuz tend to be solved by a mix of diplomacy, naval deterrence, and ad hoc coalitions instead of formal legal settlement. That pattern shows the limits of legal remedies where major power politics and urgent security concerns dominate.

International organisations play different but complementary roles. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) issues guidance on ship safety and security, urges flag and port states to take precautions, and can coordinate information sharing and warnings to ships operating near the Strait of Hormuz. The United Nations, especially the Security Council, can condemn attacks or authorise measures when incidents threaten international peace; it also produces reports that document unlawful interference with navigation and urge member states to cooperate to protect freedom of navigation. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional forum where member states coordinate maritime surveillance, information sharing, and sometimes joint responses to threats; however, GCC unity is not always consistent, and members vary in strategy and alignment with extra-regional partners. Together, these organizations provide legal norms (UNCLOS), practical guidance (IMO), political weight and potential authorisations (UN), and regional coordination (GCC). But their impact depends on member states' political will, naval capabilities, and willingness of outside powers to back collective measures. In practice, international organizations help reduce risk by standard-setting, information-sharing, and political pressure, though they rarely provide a single enforceable solution alone.

Useful CBMs include hotlines between naval commands, agreed radio and identification procedures in busy lanes, advance notification of large exercises, shared maritime domain awareness, and joint mine-clearance training. These steps lower the chance of accidents, misunderstandings, and unintended escalation in narrow waters. Historical practice shows that military-to-military contacts and regional exercises can reduce friction, while joint patrols and shared surveillance improve situational awareness for all parties. However, CBMs work best when both sides see mutual benefit and when third-party

mediators help build trust. Challenges include asymmetric capabilities, differing threat perceptions, and political distrust especially when great-power rivalry colors regional relations. Still, carefully designed CBMs and limited maritime security pacts that respect national sovereignty but create predictable behavior at sea have a strong record of reducing incidents in other strained waterways and could do so in Hormuz if political will exists.

A balanced multilateral framework is possible but politically difficult. Legally, UNCLOS already offers a baseline: transit passage protects international navigation while permitting limited coastal-state measures for safety and environmental protection. Politically, a new or reinforced framework could combine legal clarity with practical steps: agreed procedures for naval transit, an international maritime monitoring center with neutral membership, joint emergency response teams, and economic safeguards for states harmed by disruption. Confidence in such a scheme would require buy-in from Iran and Gulf states from neutral mediators and technical support from the IMO and UN. Past initiatives show that small, confidence-building, technical steps are easier to adopt than sweeping political pacts. The main obstacles are mutual distrust, regional rivalries, and great-power competition; if these persist, formal multilateral regimes will remain fragile. Still, practical, stepwise cooperation that respects Iran's sovereignty and protects global trade is a realistic goal and would reduce the incentives for unilateral threats or coercive measures in the strait.

Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to analyze the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz by examining its impact on global energy security, regional power politics, and international law. It aims to understand how Iran – U.S. tensions and Gulf states' security policies shape risks in the strait. The research also seeks to explore how external powers like the U.S., China, and Russia use military and diplomatic strategies to secure maritime trade routes. Another objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of international law, maritime security frameworks, and multilateral initiatives in reducing the chances of open conflict. Finally, the study intends to provide insights into cooperative mechanisms that can balance Iran's sovereignty with the global community's need for uninterrupted energy flows.

Significance:

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important chokepoints in the world, as a large share of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows through it every day. Any disruption in this waterway can directly affect international energy prices, supply chains, and the security of importing countries. Studying the strait's security tensions is significant because it helps explain how regional rivalries, especially between Iran and the U.S., influence global trade and stability. It also highlights the role of Gulf states and external powers in shaping the balance of power in the region. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights for policymakers, security experts, and scholars working on energy security and maritime law. More importantly, the study can suggest cooperative measures under international law and multilateral agreements that reduce the risk of conflict and ensure safe navigation for the global community.

Methodology:

This study follows a qualitative research approach based on secondary sources. Data is collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, think-tank publications, and news articles that provide insights into the politics and security of the Strait of Hormuz. A thematic method is used to

organise the study, focusing on five key research questions related to Iran – U.S. tensions, global energy security, regional power strategies, and the role of international law. Comparative analysis is applied to examine how different actors, such as Gulf states, the United States, China, and Russia, secure their interests in the strait. Case studies of past incidents, such as tanker seizures and naval clashes, are also used to connect theory with real-world events. Legal analysis is included to understand the application of UNCLOS and international maritime security frameworks. The study does not use primary interviews but relies on a critical reading of existing literature to build a clear picture of the challenges and possible solutions. This approach helps in linking regional dynamics with global energy and trade interests in a structured way.

Results:

The findings show that the Strait of Hormuz remains one of the most fragile chokepoints in global trade and energy security. The analysis highlights that nearly 20% of the world's oil supply and a large share of liquefied natural gas passes through this narrow waterway. Any disruption, even for a short period, leads to immediate rises in global oil prices and causes fear among importing countries. The study also finds that Iran has repeatedly used the strait as leverage in its foreign policy by threatening closure or engaging in limited military actions. At the same time, the U.S. has maintained a strong naval presence, supported by Gulf states, to ensure free passage and deter Iranian actions. China and Russia, while not directly militarily active in the strait, use diplomatic and economic tools to expand their influence. Multinational efforts, such as the International Maritime Security Construct, have helped reduce piracy and provide coordinated security, though they remain limited by political divisions. Legal frameworks like UNCLOS support freedom of navigation, but enforcement is weak without political consensus. The results also show that while alternative pipelines exist, they are not enough to replace the full volume passing through the strait. Energy importing countries like India, Japan, and China continue to rely heavily on the route, making them vulnerable. Finally, the study finds that confidence-building measures, backchannel diplomacy, and regional cooperation have helped prevent escalation, but no permanent multilateral security framework has yet been established to balance Iran's sovereignty with global trade needs.

Discussion:

The Strait of Hormuz continues to be one of the world's most sensitive chokepoints, shaping both energy security and geopolitical rivalries. The findings show that even the threat of disruption in the strait can raise oil prices and unsettle supply chains. U.S. naval presence and alliances provide some stability, but they also fuel Iran's resistance and bring other powers like China and Russia into play. While legal frameworks such as UNCLOS protect navigation rights, their enforcement depends on political will and cooperation, which remain weak. Regional states secure their waters with naval patrols and advanced surveillance, yet mistrust among Gulf countries and Iran prevents stronger collective action. Multinational initiatives, including the International Maritime Security Construct, help reduce risks but face legitimacy challenges. Alternatives such as pipelines offer limited relief since they cannot fully replace the strait's role. Energy-importing nations like India, China, Japan, and EU states are planning diversification strategies, but they remain heavily dependent on this passage. The discussion suggests that a durable solution requires confidence-building measures, regional dialogue, and a multilateral framework that respects Iran's sovereignty while protecting global trade interests.

Conclusion:

The Strait of Hormuz will remain a central point of global energy security and political tensions in the foreseeable future. Its importance lies not only in the volume of oil and gas that passes through it but also in the way regional rivalries and great power competition intersect in this narrow waterway. The study shows that while military patrols, diplomacy, and sanctions have managed short-term crises, they have not removed the deeper risks. Energy importers continue to rely on this chokepoint despite exploring limited alternatives. Legal protections exist under UNCLOS, but without stronger cooperation, they cannot prevent conflict. The findings highlight that only a balanced approach where regional and extra-regional powers work together through confidence-building measures, shared security mechanisms, and respect for sovereign rights can reduce instability. Ensuring free navigation in the strait is not just a Gulf issue but a global responsibility tied to peace, trade, and economic stability.

Policy Recommendations:

- Promote confidence-building measures between Gulf states and Iran, including joint naval drills and communication hotlines.
- Strengthen neutral maritime security frameworks under the UN or International Maritime Organisation to guarantee safe navigation.
- Develop alternative energy routes such as pipelines and port facilities to reduce overdependence on the Strait.
- Encourage multilateral dialogues under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and UN platforms to balance Iran's sovereignty with global trade needs.
- Establish crisis communication mechanisms among regional and extra-regional actors to prevent accidental escalation.
- Avoid overreliance on arms sales and unilateral sanctions, as these often fuel mistrust and instability.
- Enhance energy security cooperation among major importers like India, China, Japan, and the EU to manage supply shocks.
- Support inclusive regional security arrangements that involve both Arab Gulf states and Iran to ensure long-term stability.

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