Holding the Strait: Maritime Order and the Case for a Coalition of the Willing

Emmanuel Navon / 26 March 2026

Executive Summary

The Strait of Hormuz is the most critical maritime energy chokepoint in the global economy, through which approximately 20 percent of global petroleum consumption and a comparable share of liquefied natural gas transit. Iran's recent actions, from attacks on commercial shipping to threats of closure and the deployment of naval mines, mark a significant escalation in the use of maritime disruption as an instrument of geopolitical coercion.

Iran does not need to close the Strait permanently to achieve its objectives. By leveraging asymmetric capabilities such as mines, drones, fast attack craft, and coastal missile systems, it can create sufficient uncertainty to halt traffic, raise insurance costs, and destabilize global energy markets. Even limited disruptions can generate disproportionate economic effects.

Reopening the Strait is militarily feasible but operationally complex and time-consuming. Mine warfare introduces a dimension of protraction that favors Iran's strategy. Historical precedents, from the Tanker War of the 1980s to mine clearance 991, demonstrate that even relatively small numbers of mines can affic for extended periods.

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The central issue is therefore not one of capability but of political will and strategic coordination. A sustained effort to restore freedom of navigation cannot be borne indefinitely by a single power. It requires a coalition of the willing composed of states that recognize that the security of maritime commons is indivisible and that the cost of inaction will exceed the cost of coordinated response.

Such a coalition must reflect the strategic interdependence of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Within this framework, Israel provides critical added value through intelligence capabilities, air and missile defense systems, operational experience in countering asymmetric threats, and its growing integration into regional security architectures.

The crisis in the Strait of Hormuz is thus a test of strategic credibility. Its outcome will shape whether coercive disruption becomes a viable tool for revisionist powers or whether free nations can collectively uphold the principles of open and secure global commons.

Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz has long been recognized as a strategic chokepoint, but the current crisis reveals that its significance extends beyond geography. It is now a central arena in the evolution of modern conflict, where the objective is not territorial control but systemic disruption.

Iran’s actions illustrate a broader transformation in the use of force. Rather than seeking decisive engagements, states increasingly pursue strategies that combine limited military actions with maximal economic and psychological effects. These strategies operate below the threshold of full-scale war while exploiting the interdependence of the global economy. By targeting critical nodes such as maritime chokepoints, they impose costs that reverberate far beyond the immediate

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The Strait of Hormuz is uniquely suited to this form of coercion. Its narrow geography, high traffic density, and lack of viable alternatives make it highly sensitive to disruption. As a result, even modest actions such as the placement of a small number of naval mines or the harassment of a handful of commercial vessels can halt traffic and trigger global market reactions. Iran does not need to dominate the Strait: it only needs to make its use sufficiently risky to deter commercial actors. In doing so, it transforms a maritime passage into a strategic lever.

The implications extend beyond the Gulf. The crisis exposes the vulnerability of a global system that depends on open and secure commons but lacks effective mechanisms to defend them collectively. It also highlights the growing alignment among revisionist powers, whose interests converge in weakening the norms and institutions that underpin maritime order. The question is therefore not simply how to reopen the Strait, but how to respond to a form of conflict that is designed to exploit hesitation, impose costs, and fragment political cohesion.

I. The Strait of Hormuz as a Systemic Chokepoint

The Strait of Hormuz is the single most important maritime energy chokepoint in the world. Approximately one-fifth of global oil consumption (around 20 million barrels per day) and a comparable share of liquefied natural gas transit through this narrow corridor. These flows connect producers in the Gulf to consumers in Europe and Asia, making the Strait a central artery of the global economy.

Its importance is magnified by the absence of viable alternatives. While pipelines and alternative routes exist, they lack the capacity to compensate for a sustained disruption. This structural constraint means that even temporary interruptions can produce immediate and far-reaching consequences, including sharp increases in energy prices, volatility in financial markets, and broader economic uncertainty.

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ption does not require physical closure. The Strait functions as a chokepoint as much as a physical one. Shipping companies, insurers, and port operators respond to perceived risk as much as to actual attacks.

A small number of incidents, or even credible threats, can lead to a suspension of traffic.

Historical experience underscores this dynamic. During the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, attacks on shipping in the Gulf led to a sharp decline in tanker traffic, prompting the United States to launch Operation Earnest Will, escorting reflagged Kuwaiti tankers. Similarly, in 1988, the mining of the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* by an Iranian mine demonstrated how even limited mine deployment could have strategic effects.

More broadly, the history of mine warfare illustrates the disproportionate impact of relatively small arsenals. In 1972, the United States effectively shut down North Vietnam's Haiphong harbor by laying just 36 mines. In 1991, Iraq's deployment of approximately 1,000 mines off the Kuwaiti coast significantly constrained U.S. naval operations, despite the overwhelming superiority of coalition forces.

These precedents highlight a fundamental reality: the effectiveness of mine warfare lies not in destruction but in disruption. This is precisely the logic that Iran is now exploiting in the Strait of Hormuz.

II. Iran's Strategy: Asymmetric Coercion and Strategic Disruption

Iran's approach to the Strait reflects decades of investment in asymmetric capabilities designed to offset conventional inferiority. Rather than attempting to contest control of the sea, Iran seeks to deny its safe use.

At the center of this strategy is a layered system of threats. Naval mines provide the foundation, offering a low-cost, high-impact means of disrupting traffic. These are complemented by fast attack craft capable of swarm tactics, unmanned surface and aerial systems, midget submarines, and shore-based anti-ship missile batteries. Together, these assets create a complex and dynamic threat

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The effectiveness of this system lies in its integration. Individually, each component may be manageable; collectively, they can create what amounts to a “gauntlet” through which commercial vessels must pass. This increases the uncertainty faced by shipping companies and raises the perceived risk to levels that can halt traffic even in the absence of widespread destruction.

Importantly, Iran’s strategy is calibrated. It does not seek permanent closure of the Strait, which would also damage its own economic interests and provoke overwhelming retaliation. Instead, it aims to generate sufficient disruption to impose economic costs and political pressure on its adversaries. This approach reflects a broader understanding of conflict in which time is a critical variable. By prolonging disruption and forcing its adversaries into a reactive posture, Iran can exploit the asymmetry between its own tolerance for risk and the sensitivity of global markets to instability.

Iran’s actions must also be understood within a wider geopolitical context. Its alignment with China and Russia contributes to an environment in which Western responses are constrained by competing priorities and strategic fragmentation. Although these powers may not be directly involved in operations in the Strait, they benefit from the erosion of Western cohesion and the weakening of norms governing freedom of navigation.

III. Reopening the Strait: A Costly and Protracted Campaign

Reopening the Strait of Hormuz is not a single operation but a campaign that unfolds in phases, each of which presents distinct operational challenges.

The initial phase involves degrading Iran’s ability to disrupt maritime traffic. This includes targeting naval assets, mine-laying platforms, missile batteries, and command-and-control systems. Such operations can significantly reduce the [illegible]at, as demonstrated by past U.S. actions that have destroyed large [illegible]nian vessels and infrastructure. However, they are unlikely to

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eliminate the threat entirely, particularly given Iran's ability to disperse and conceal assets along its coastline.

The second phase, mine clearance, represents the most demanding and time-consuming component of the campaign. Mine countermeasure operations are inherently slow and methodical, requiring specialized equipment and exposing forces to significant risk. Conducting these operations under threat from missiles, drones, and small-boat attacks further complicates the task.

Historical precedents illustrate the scale of the challenge. In 1991, it took the United States and its allies 51 days to clear 907 mines off the Kuwaiti coast, and this was in a permissive environment following the end of major hostilities. In the Strait of Hormuz, where clearance would likely occur under ongoing threat, timelines could be significantly longer. Even modest mine deployments can have outsized effects. As noted, a few dozen mines have historically been sufficient to halt maritime traffic. Iran's potential inventory, estimated in the thousands, suggests that even partial deployment could create sustained disruption.

The final phase involves the establishment of convoy systems to escort commercial shipping through the Strait. This approach has proven effective in the past, notably during Operation Earnest Will, but it requires sustained naval presence and coordination. It also imposes constraints on shipping capacity and efficiency, further contributing to economic pressure.

Taken together, these phases underscore a central paradox: while superior naval forces can ultimately restore access to the Strait, the process of doing so is costly, risky, and time-consuming. This aligns with Iran's strategy of protraction, in which delay itself becomes a source of leverage.

IV. From Naval Superiority to Political Will: The Case for a Coalition of the ……

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The operational realities of reopening the Strait make clear that naval superiority alone is insufficient. What is required is sustained political will and coordinated action among states that share an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation.

A coalition of the willing provides the most viable framework for such an effort. Unlike formal alliances, which may be constrained by institutional limitations and divergent priorities, a coalition can be flexible, mission-oriented, and inclusive of states with varying capabilities.

The demands of the current crisis are substantial. Sustained strike operations, extended mine countermeasure efforts, convoy escort missions, and integrated air and missile defense all require resources and endurance. No single state, including the United States, can indefinitely sustain the full burden of such operations without incurring significant strain.

The logic of a coalition is therefore both operational and strategic. By distributing burdens and demonstrating collective resolve, it reduces the effectiveness of Iran's strategy of protraction. It also sends a clear signal that attempts to disrupt global commons will be met with coordinated resistance.

Europe's role in this framework is particularly important. As a major beneficiary of maritime stability, Europe faces a strategic imperative to contribute more actively to its defense. The current crisis exposes the limitations of a posture that combines economic dependence with strategic restraint. A coalition of the willing must therefore be understood as a mechanism for restoring not only maritime security but also strategic credibility.

V. Israel's Added Value in a Euro-Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Security Architecture

Within this framework, Israel brings capabilities that are highly relevant to the

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Israel's intelligence capabilities are critical in an environment characterized by dispersed and concealed threats. The ability to detect and track mine-laying platforms, missile batteries, and unmanned systems enhances the effectiveness of operations aimed at degrading Iran's disruptive capacity. Israel's experience in air and missile defense, developed in response to sustained threats from multiple directions, provides valuable expertise for protecting both military assets and commercial shipping. The integration of such systems into a broader coalition framework can enhance resilience against layered threats.

Operationally, Israel has demonstrated adaptability in dealing with asymmetric and multi-domain threats, including the use of unmanned systems and long-range strike capabilities. These capabilities are directly relevant to the conditions in the Strait, where flexibility and rapid response are essential.

Finally, Israel's growing integration into regional security frameworks positions it as a bridge between Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Cooperation with Gulf states and Mediterranean partners reflects a broader convergence of interests that can be leveraged in the context of a coalition of the willing.

Conclusion: A Test of Strategic Credibility

The crisis in the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a regional security challenge. It is a test of whether free nations are willing and able to defend the principles that underpin the global economy. Iran's strategy of calibrated disruption exploits time, uncertainty, and division. It reflects a broader trend in which revisionist actors seek to reshape international order without engaging in direct confrontation.

The response to this challenge will have far-reaching implications. If successful, it will reinforce the credibility of international norms and demonstrate the capacity of free nations to act collectively. If not, it will signal that coercive disruption is an effective tool for reshaping global order.

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A coalition of the willing offers a pathway to meeting this challenge. By combining capabilities, sharing burdens, and sustaining political will, such a coalition can restore freedom of navigation and uphold the integrity of the global commons. The Strait of Hormuz is where this test is now unfolding. Its outcome will shape not only the future of maritime security but the broader trajectory of international order.

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