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# Hormuz: Breaking the Insecurity Continuum

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Editors



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# Introduction

Virginie Collombier, Luigi Narbone, and Akram Zaoui

The conflict that has engulfed the Middle East since Israel and the United States (US) attacked Iran on 28 February 2026 highlights the accelerating erosion of the international rules-based order. What makes this latest escalation in the three-year-long Middle Eastern war particularly significant is the contestation surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, a critical maritime chokepoint whose disruption carries consequences far beyond the region given its central role in the international energy system and, consequently, the global economy. The weaponisation of the Strait illustrates the challenges facing international law and multilateral governance, and underscores the need for collective efforts to uphold freedom of navigation and ensure the safe passage of civilian and commercial vessels.

## The Brutalisation of International Law

Since the end of the Second World War, international legal norms have ensured a degree of predictability and peaceful coexistence in the international arena. In recent years, however, violations of these norms have been increasingly normalised. These include aggression; resource grabbing; threats of territorial annexation; the unrestrained use of force and disrespect of international humanitarian law; atrocities committed against civilian populations; contempt for the obligations of occupying powers; pressure on multilateral organisations tasked with relief and peace-making; campaigns against international justice, including sanctions targeting the International Criminal Court (ICC); and growing breaches of trade norms.

The actions of permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC)—most notably, China, Russia, and the US—are shaping this worrying trend, as exemplified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US military operation in Venezuela. Great powers' disregard for international law has helped create an international environment in which serious violations are openly perpetrated, including in the context of ongoing wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, and Sudan.

The law of the sea—in its customary form and as codified in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), or as it concerns naval warfare—is no exception. In recent years, UNCLOS has faced repeated infringements, and

great powers have been among the principal actors challenging its application. China has sought to assert control over maritime territories in the South China Sea, going against the ruling of an arbitral tribunal at The Hague that ruled in favour of the Philippines. Russia has reportedly used civilian vessels for military purposes, including in the transport of arms, while restricting or targeting civilian shipping in the Black Sea. The US too, has employed lethal force in international waters, including against boats allegedly linked to drug trafficking in the Caribbean.

The intensifying competition between major powers is fundamentally reshaping the global order. Their tendency to disregard international rules is one dimension of this. However, increasingly, these rules and multilateral settings are also being actively weaponised. This attitude of great powers reverberates across the geopolitical landscape—eroding longstanding principles, blurring red-lines, and incentivising middle powers to pursue their interests outside the bounds of international law. Ultimately, this breakdown feeds the tendency to frame international issues primarily through the narrow lens of national security.

Traditionally, states have used abstention from signing or ratifying international instruments, or withdrawal from international organisations, to register their disagreement, which constitutes a sovereign right. Iran and the US, for example, signed UNCLOS but never ratified it, while Israel and Türkiye are not parties to the Convention.

However, states, and particularly great powers, now increasingly use other mechanisms to pursue foreign policy objectives or counter the constraints of international rules. These include grounding decisions with international implications in domestic legislation, often invoking national security; expanding extraterritoriality through measures such as secondary sanctions; and bending international rules by either imposing specific interpretations or contesting the empirical evidence that would trigger their enforcement. Such approaches have often been combined with the imposition of facts on the ground through military means.

The cumulative effect of these mechanisms has been the undermining of the legitimacy of international law, multilateralism, and the rules-based international system. The result is not simply a weakening of rules, but an increasingly contested space in which states routinely seek to shape, circumvent, or selectively apply these laws in pursuit of strategic objectives.

## Economic Warfare and the Weaponisation of Chokepoints

Economy too, has come to be perceived through the lens of power and security. In a globalised world economy underpinned by international flows, network infrastructure, and global value chains, interdependence itself is being weaponised.[1] The US intervention in Venezuela and its agenda of "energy dominance", for instance, should be understood within this framework.

It is also in this wider context that so-called "chokepoints" have gained prominence.[2] The term originates in the naval domain, referring to key geographic bottlenecks, navigation through

which becomes essential to the geopolitics and wealth of nations, introducing economic and strategic risks. The control of chokepoints and the arrangements governing passage through them become matters of global consequence and of direct interest to major powers. In recent years, the notion of chokepoints has broadened to encompass new domains beyond the seas. China's dominance in the refining of rare-earth elements, for example, and Beijing's readiness to wield that control in disputes with the US have increasingly been interpreted through this analytical lens.

The Strait of Hormuz represents one of the clearest manifestations of this broader dynamic. One of the most globally consequential chokepoints, it serves as a critical node in global energy flows, and its disruption can turn economic interdependence into a source of strategic leverage, with consequences extending far beyond the immediate region.

Iranian actions around the Strait should be understood against this backdrop. By blocking civilian vessels, laying mines, targeting tankers attempting to transit the Strait, and attacking offshore and onshore energy infrastructure, Iran has militarised bodies of water, securitised civilian flows, and weaponised chokepoints to pursue strategic objectives.

In the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the US and Iran in June 2026, the fifth point offers an illustration of how international law can become subject to competing interpretations. It leaves it to Iran to "conduct dialog with the Sultanate of Oman to define the future administration and maritime services in the Strait of Hormuz in discussion with other Persian Gulf littoral states in line with the applicable international law and the sovereign rights of coastal states."[3] The provision leaves questions unaddressed concerning the future governance of the Strait, including the roles of Iran, Oman, and the other Arabian–Persian Gulf littoral states.

The broader challenge that remains is that the Strait cannot be considered in isolation from the wider maritime system. Its security cannot be separated from the question of how its governance and the rules governing passage through it is upheld in practice. Given its connection to the Gulf of Oman and the North-western Indian Ocean, and further westward to the Bab el-Mandeb, Red Sea and Suez, disruptions in one maritime space have consequences for others.

Various countries have attempted to address these challenges through regional cooperation, multinational naval deployments, and broader coalitions. Yet, maritime insecurity persists, raising questions about the adequacy of existing arrangements and about what a more sustainable multilateral approach might look like. Who should provide leadership? How should regional and extra-regional actors share responsibility? Can approaches developed in one maritime theatre be adapted to another? And how can the perspectives of states directly affected by maritime insecurity be incorporated into arrangements that have often been shaped by external powers?

## From Instability to Multilateral Response

While the weaponisation of Hormuz reflects the broader dynamics of international affairs outlined earlier, it must also be situated within the specific geopolitical, historical, and geographical context of the Middle East.

The 2026 Middle East crisis is the latest episode of a longstanding divide between the northern and southern shores of the Arabian–Persian Gulf—a rift that originated during the 1979 Iranian revolution and has since deepened. The 1984–1988 Iran–Iraq Tanker War offered an early illustration of the weaponisation of the waterway.

A second way to frame the crisis is through the series of kinetic confrontations that followed the attacks carried out on 7 October 2023. The conflict's regionalisation quickly extended to the maritime domain, as the Houthis began targeting vessels of the countries they deemed hostile or complicit in the destruction in Gaza. The resulting disruption to shipping around the Bab el-Mandeb and Red Sea, and its consequences for the Suez Canal, highlighted the interconnectedness of the region's maritime chokepoints.

While the recent attacks across the Arabian–Persian Gulf and the naval embargo the Houthis declared on Saudi Arabia in July 2026 echo earlier episodes of maritime weaponisation, they also underscore how distinct conflicts overlap, as evident in the case of the Iranian-Israeli rivalry and Saudi Arabia's confrontation with the Houthis.

This interconnectedness—and the transmission channels that carry conflict from one flashpoint, and from one chokepoint, to the next—should be seen as a defining feature of the 2026 Middle East crisis and of the system within which it is unfolding. That system is one of structural instability extending well beyond the Gulf, one in which Africa and the Middle East; civilian and military; economics and security; land and sea; and local, regional, and global dynamics form a continuum.

Policymakers must bear this in mind when approaching the complex expanse of Afro-Eurasia stretching from the Mediterranean to the wider North-western Indian Ocean, and from the Caucasus to the Horn of Africa. It is within this wider geographical and strategic context that the question of how to secure Hormuz—and how to develop a sustainable multilateral response—must be considered.

Despite intensifying conflicts and heightened tensions, space for multilateralism still exists. Broad coalitions, inclusive frameworks, purposeful engagement and, where appropriate, minilateral formats may offer avenues for addressing the intractable problems resulting from the ongoing conflict. The contributions that follow explore the possibilities and limitations of different approaches in the context of Hormuz and the wider maritime system.

This compendium brings together eight contributions approaching the question from complementary perspectives. The first chapter asks whether multilateral approaches can do more to guarantee free passage in Hormuz, while the seventh examines the leadership format required to secure the Strait. The second and third essays broaden the geographical and analytical lens, exploring the relationship between Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, drawing lessons from this crisis for other theatres. The fourth, fifth, and eighth bring Gulf, Indian, and African perspectives into the discussion, while the sixth considers what can be learned from European

naval missions and built upon after the Hormuz crisis. Taken together, the chapters in this special report explore not only how Hormuz might be secured, but also who should shape the response, how different maritime theatres are connected, and what a genuinely multilateral maritime-security architecture might look like.

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1

# Can Multilateral Approaches Do More for Free Passage in the Strait of Hormuz?

Zeynab Malakouti

In February 2026, the United States (US) and Israel launched a war of choice against Iran, prompting the latter to close the Strait of Hormuz. In response, the US enforced a naval blockade targeting vessels travelling to and from Iranian ports. Since then, efforts to restore freedom of navigation in the region have been largely ineffective. Neither the unilateral US response through "Operation Project Freedom" nor various multilateral initiatives, such as the France-UK-led initiative to secure the Strait,[1] have succeeded in resolving the crisis.

However, this setback does not imply that multilateralism is not a viable solution to the Hormuz crisis, but that many of its core principles have been insufficiently applied in the efforts to address the issue and to engage with Iran's role and influence in the region. Multilateralism extends far beyond coordinating actions among a group of states: it requires a shared commitment to collective problem-solving, equality and inclusivity, shared responsibility, a rules-based international order, dialogue and diplomacy, and the principle of leaving no one [country] behind.[2] Without these foundational elements, a multilateral initiative is unlikely to be perceived as either legitimate or effective, undermining its ability to achieve a durable resolution.

## The Strait of Hormuz: Leverage, Recognition, and Reintegration

While the Strait of Hormuz is a strait used for international navigation, connecting one part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with another part of the high seas or an EEZ, its waters are not "international waters".[3] The Strait lies within the territorial seas of Iran and Oman and is therefore subject to their sovereignty. The extent of the coastal states' control over navigation through the Strait depends, however, on whether the applicable regime is transit passage or innocent passage. Iran maintains that, as it is not a party to the UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) and considers the transit passage regime not to have attained the status

of customary international law, passage through its territorial waters in the Strait is governed by the more restrictive regime of innocent passage.[4] This position would afford Iran greater control over navigation through the Strait than would the transit passage regime under UNCLOS.

For years, Iran faced growing domestic pressure to close the Strait in response to what was internally perceived as coercive actions by foreign states, particularly the imposition of economic sanctions.[5] Until the current crisis, however, the international community continued to benefit from the uninterrupted use of the Strait for international navigation. The threat of an Iranian closure was largely dismissed as a hypothetical worst-case scenario, based on the assumption that Iran lacked both the risk tolerance and tactical capability to execute such a blockade.

These longstanding assumptions have now been challenged. Iran's considerable leverage over the Strait has allowed it to shape the process of its reopening to its own advantage. This is reflected in the Iran-US Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) formally signed on 19 June 2026,[6] under which Iran committed to facilitating the safe passage of commercial vessels free of charge for a period of 60 days until 18 August 2026. Long-term administration, governance, and provision of maritime services in the Strait were deferred to future negotiations. However, even this short-term agreement was breached by mid-July, with both sides blaming each other for violating terms.

Two decades of economic sanctions have forced Iran to watch neighbouring countries prosper while it has remained unable to fully capitalise on its strategic position along one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. Moreover, the country has had to divert significant resources towards circumventing sanctions to maintain its imports and exports. One of the stated purposes of sanctions is to avert full-scale military confrontation. In Iran's case, however, the country has also been subjected to military strikes by the US and Israel. These attacks have reportedly damaged industries and critical infrastructure, including steel facilities, bridges, and water reservoirs – assets that were built and maintained despite years of severe economic restrictions. While Iran has previously retaliated with attacks on military and civilian facilities in neighbouring countries, through the closure of the Strait, it now seeks recognition as a pivotal actor – both as a legitimate regional stakeholder and as an influential participant in global affairs. It aims to reinforce its strategic importance and underscore its ability to influence maritime security as well as the economic interests of the countries that depend on the Strait for international commerce.

However, Tehran's actions reinforce the international perception that it is weaponising the waterway, effectively holding it hostage to extract political leverage. Iranian officials increasingly view the Strait as one of the country's most significant sources of strategic leverage: not for ending the war but for shaping the post-war order.[7] In the aftermath of the conflict, Iran is likely to negotiate its reintegration into the international economy: secure and uninterrupted passage through the Strait in exchange for Iran's economic normalisation and its restoration as a legitimate participant in the global economy.

## No Iran, No Effective Multilateral Initiative

Resolving the Hormuz crisis requires collective decision-making; unilateral actions cannot secure a waterway upon which so many states depend economically. The reopening of the Strait will not automatically restore normal operations. Several challenges will remain that can only be addressed through a multilateral approach, including the clearance of naval mines, the management of shipping traffic, and the establishment of a sustainable security framework for the waterway.

Therefore, Iran must be included in any future arrangement governing the Strait and allowed to share in the economic benefits generated by the waterway. In line with the principle of "leaving no one behind", a sustainable solution requires active participation from all key stakeholders, which includes Iran and Oman. Excluding Iran risks reproducing the same policy of isolation that prolonged the nuclear crisis, perpetuating the underlying dispute.

Similarly, a coalition-based military intervention to forcefully reopen the Strait would further complicate the situation rather than resolve it.[8] As the war has already demonstrated, military action may not only fail to resolve the existing problem but also create new challenges that further destabilise the region.

Additional sanctions too offer no guarantee of securing long-term stable and uninterrupted passage through the Strait. While the European Union[9] and the US[10] continue to rely on punitive sanctions in response to Iran's actions and policies perceived as threatening the freedom of navigation in the region, the use of such coercive tools have historically yielded limited success. Over the years, Iran has demonstrated not only political, social, and economic resilience but also a sustained capacity for resistance. Thus, isolation, sanctions, and military strikes are unlikely to produce a sustainable outcome in this case.

## The Political Economy of Hormuz: Benefits, Security, and Cooperation

The reopening of the Strait of Hormuz will not automatically restore the pre-war status in the region. The current conflict has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape, paving the way for a new governance framework in which regional stakeholders share in the economic and strategic benefits generated by the Strait. By ensuring all stakeholders have a shared interest in safeguarding uninterrupted navigation in the Strait, a multilateral governance mechanism would rely on reciprocal commitments, institutional oversight, and aligned mutual interests. The objective is to replace unilateral crisis management with a framework in which all principal stakeholders have both rights and responsibilities.

To understand this dynamic, the Strait of Hormuz must be analysed from Iran's perspective across three interconnected aspects: security, economics, and legality. From a security perspective, control over the Strait is one of Iran's most significant strategic assets – serving as both a source of political leverage and a deterrent against potential military action. By disrupting one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, Iran has demonstrated its ability to drive up the

potential global economic and security costs of any military confrontation.

From an economic perspective, the issue can be understood in two ways. First, Iran may use its strategic position in the Strait as leverage to negotiate international sanction relief and global economic reintegration. Second, Iran has repeatedly suggested the possibility of imposing transit-related service fees on vessels transiting through the Strait. While the Iranian Parliament has not adopted a formal legislation on the matter, and some political and legal voices urge caution until post-war diplomatic relations become clearer, there is growing domestic pressure to institutionalise such charges.

From a legal perspective, any attempt by Iran to implement a transit fee will face severe international hurdles. The legal status of the Strait of Hormuz remains a heavily contested area of international law. Despite signing the UNCLOS, Iran has not ratified it and does not recognise the "transit passage" regime as reflecting customary international law. It maintains instead that the regime of "innocent passage" applies to the Strait. Having consistently maintained the position of a "persistent objector",[11] Iran can choose to apply the rules governing innocent passage, under which a coastal state may take appropriate measures within its territorial sea to prevent passage that is not innocent. Furthermore, in cooperation with Oman, Iran has the right to request that the International Maritime Organization revise the existing Traffic Separation Scheme applicable to the Strait.

While the Strait of Hormuz is frequently compared to the Turkish Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the legal frameworks governing these waterways are fundamentally different. The Turkish Straits are regulated by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which establishes a specific legal regime and excludes them from the transit passage provisions of the UNCLOS. By contrast, the Strait of Hormuz has never been governed by a comparable treaty regime, either before or after the adoption of UNCLOS in 1982. As a result, its legal status continues to be shaped by competing interpretations of international law, particularly regarding the applicability of the transit passage and innocent passage regimes.[12]

For long-term stabilisation, any new governance architecture must ensure that the closure or disruption of the Strait negatively impacts every state, including Iran. Historically, sanctions and the limited integration of its ports into international trade networks have limited Iran's ability to capitalise on the economic opportunities associated with maritime trade, leaving it with little to lose from disruptions. If Iran continues to remain economically and politically isolated from the benefits generated by the Strait, the long-term security of the waterway cannot be guaranteed. A sustainable security framework must therefore create shared economic interests in uninterrupted navigation, ensuring that the disruption of maritime traffic is just as economically and politically detrimental to Iran as it would be to other regional and international stakeholders.

Ultimately, neither economic incentives nor security guarantees can be sustained without effective multilateral cooperation among all actors. As this is increasingly acknowledged, the proposed meeting on the Strait of Hormuz, bringing together Iran, Oman, and the other littoral states, reflects this understanding, even though the meeting has been postponed.[13]

Defining the stakeholder hierarchy is critical for this cooperation to work. While each state has a legitimate interest in ensuring its security and uninterrupted operation, their roles and responsibilities are not equal and may be understood as a hierarchy. At the highest level are Iran and Oman, whose sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Strait give them primary responsibility for its management and security. The second level consists of the Persian Gulf littoral states, which have direct economic and strategic interests in maintaining freedom of navigation and regional stability. The third level comprises the broader international community, who have no territorial connection to the Strait but rely on it for international trade and energy supplies. A cooperation breakdown at any level of this hierarchy will undermine the effectiveness of the broader cooperative framework. Thus, maintaining the safety, security, and stability of the Strait of Hormuz requires sustained collaboration among all stakeholders, with each actor fulfilling its responsibilities.

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*The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT 5.6 Sol for English-language editing prior to submission.*

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# The Weaponisation of Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz Chokepoints

Virginie Collombier and Luigi Narbone

For decades, freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb has been considered a global public good, protected through international law—particularly the principle of unimpeded transit passage under Article 38 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)[a]—and external military deterrence. While periodically challenged,[b] this governance framework had proved remarkably resilient until recent crises fundamentally altered the status quo.

Today, the two chokepoints form part of an integrated system of insecurity in which regional conflicts of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa intersect and amplify one another. The weaponisation of the Bab el-Mandeb by the Houthis,[c] beginning in 2023, and of Hormuz by Iran, in 2026, occurred in the context of high-stake regional wars, allowing relatively weak state and non-state actors to turn these geographic bottlenecks into strategic amplifiers. The regional and global economic disruptions caused by the blockade of trade routes transformed local conflicts into major geopolitical events. Furthermore, the crisis has exposed profound gaps in the governance of both straits, which are difficult to bridge and are likely to have repercussions that will outlast the ongoing wars.

Much attention has been directed to the maritime dimension of the Hormuz–Bab el Mandeb conundrum. However, since the principal drivers of this maritime instability are terrestrial—rooted in political fragmentation, contested authority, proxy conflicts, and geopolitical competition on land—naval operations to secure individual waterway alone cannot ensure effective and sustainable solutions. Governing

a Article 38 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes the right of transit passage. All ships and aircraft enjoy the right of transit passage, which must not be impeded by bordering states.

b For instance, during the Iran-Iraq war, with the so-called "Tanker War," or with the tanker attacks in 2019.

c Officially known as Ansar Allah.

the two chokepoints requires moving beyond predominantly military and sea-centric approaches towards a multilayered regional governance framework.

## From Connected Chokepoints to an Integrated System of Insecurity

The Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb increasingly function as a single strategic system in which the maritime, political, economic, and security dynamics of the Middle East and Horn of Africa are deeply intertwined. This system is shaped by, and in turn impacts, both the horizontal and vertical dynamics that influence the wider region. Horizontally, expanding regional trade and investment have deepened interdependence between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, while simultaneously fostering geopolitical rivalry and militarisation, thus increasing instability. Vertically, both chokepoints are embedded in global energy and logistics networks, which structurally links regional conflicts and ensuing disruptions to international trade and the world economy. Consequently, local security dynamics are increasingly tethered to broader great power rivalries and Middle Eastern geopolitical competition.

This increasingly intertwined system stretching from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf has impacted maritime security across both waterways, as illustrated by the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and by the Hormuz crisis. Moreover, it provides opportunities for deeper tactical cooperation between armed groups across the western Indo-Pacific, as evidenced by reports of operational links between the Houthis and Somalia's al-Shabaab.[1]

Within this framework, the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints is evolving. Their value increasingly lies not only in the high volume of trade they carry but also in their capacity to amplify local conflicts and translate local disruptions into global economic and geopolitical shocks.

Unlike the piracy of the 2010s, which targeted vessels primarily for economic gain, recent attacks on commercial shipping in Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb have aimed at advancing broader strategic objectives. State and non-state actors alike leverage these attacks for political signalling and coercion. Furthermore, the threshold for disruption is remarkably low as a single missile or drone strike against a commercial vessel may be sufficient to raise insurance premiums, force shipping companies to adopt costly rerouting, and disrupt global logistics. Given the favourable cost-benefit ratio and the relative ease of execution of such tactics, their future proliferation among other state and non-state actors remains a distinct possibility.

International law no longer controls states' behaviour in this new geopolitical landscape. Instead, it is increasingly used to justify actions, shape narratives, and influence third parties.[2] This evolution is likely to reshape the governance of strategic waterways in the Middle East and beyond.

## The Limits of Fragmented, Military, and Sea-Centric Responses

In recent years, maritime security in the Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz has become a shared priority for multiple global actors.

However, international response has remained fragmented and heavily reliant on ineffective military approaches.[3]

Across the wider Bab el Mandeb-Gulf of Aden space, external and regional powers have expanded their naval and logistical presence, reinforcing their military postures to secure critical shipping routes. While the US has traditionally acted as the primary guarantor of maritime security in these waters, it has increasingly sought to shift the burden to regional and extra-regional partners. This trend has been further reinforced under the Trump administration which no longer views regional maritime security as a strategic priority.[4] However, an alternative regional or international mechanism to coordinate maritime security is yet to emerge. Moreover, no inclusive framework has been established to promote collective responsibility for safeguarding freedom of navigation. This lack of cooperative response stems from prevailing geopolitical rivalries and diverging strategic priorities, which have reinforced competitive approaches and stymied collaboration efforts.

Moreover, the principal drivers of maritime insecurity in Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb are not maritime in origin. While naval operations are necessary for managing immediate threats, they are insufficient for restoring durable confidence in maritime routes or addressing the underlying drivers of insecurity. Recent operations against Houthi threats in the Red Sea illustrate the limitations of military approaches.[5]

The situation in the Strait of Hormuz is even more emblematic. Iran's blockade of maritime traffic during its conflict with the US and Israel has proved to be an immensely effective instrument of asymmetric warfare, allowing Tehran to exert pressure on the US, the countries of the region, and the broader international community alike.[6] It is likely that Iran will continue to deploy this tactic, or threaten to do so, in the future.

This leverage serves as the foundation for Iran's current negotiating posture, aimed at establishing a binational system of governing the Strait with neighbouring Oman. This mechanism would grant Iran full control over transiting vessels as well as generate revenue through service fees mechanisms[7]—a *de facto* termination of the unimpeded transit passage regime that existed before the war. Despite fierce US opposition to such an arrangement, geographic reality makes any military operation aimed at forcing Iran to relinquish its control over Hormuz both operationally challenging and financially unpalatable.

Ultimately, the limitations of maritime operations are more structural than operational. They are costly, politically difficult to sustain,[d] and require complex coalitions. More fundamentally, they address symptoms rather than causes. The challenge, therefore, is to develop governance arrangements capable of addressing the political and institutional drivers of insecurity across the wider Red Sea–Hormuz arena.

d The heated member states' debate around force generation for the EU missions is a useful example of the political complexity surrounding naval operations.

## From Maritime Security to Regional Governance

The Strait of Malacca provides one of the most developed examples of functional maritime cooperation among littoral states managing a high-traffic strategic chokepoint. Regional cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand has progressively reduced maritime insecurity in the Strait while fully preserving national sovereignty. Through the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and associated surveillance and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, these states have maintained effective operational coordination against piracy and maritime crimes[8] – demonstrating how incremental cooperation among coastal states can yield collective security outcomes.

In contrast, broader strategic complexity and geopolitical fragmentation in the Red Sea–Hormuz region make sustained regional coordination and comprehensive regional frameworks significantly harder to establish. Cooperation in this theatre is therefore more likely to emerge through narrow, functional arrangements addressing specific operational needs.

A first step in this direction was taken on 31 July 2026, with Saudi Arabia hosting the first meeting of a new Multinational Maritime Defence Alliance—supported by 14 countries and aimed at protecting global trade routes in the Red Sea.[9] Riyadh framed the initiative as a step towards establishing a collective security architecture to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Red Sea while also building a broader regional stability framework.

The proposed Alliance signals that regional states are increasingly cognisant of the need to prioritise the land-sea security nexus. However, there is a risk of the project remaining a non-starter, much like the Red Sea Council launched by Saudi Arabia in 2020. Given the low level of geopolitical trust among key stakeholders, maritime governance in the region is more likely to evolve incrementally through functional cooperation in less sensitive areas of soft security.

## Potential Multilateral Frameworks in the Hormuz-Red Sea Arena

In the Hormuz-Red Sea arena, regional and international actors must pursue a gradual strategy built on aligned interests and mutual economic opportunities. Over time, these functional entry points may generate sufficient trust to sustain more structured regional cooperation. While multilateral frameworks alone cannot resolve the structural fragmentation of the region, comparative experience suggests they can help preserve channels of dialogue and stabilise expectations during crises.

For the Red Sea, this process can be initiated through initiatives operating across three mutually reinforcing levels.

First, immediate operational cooperation should centre on practical maritime security

functions, where the interests of all stakeholders partially converge. This includes reinforcing coast guard capabilities in the Horn of Africa, fostering coordination and information sharing, strengthening maritime domain awareness, and improving maritime interoperability between deployed naval forces and port and shipping security systems. These measures can establish baseline predictability without requiring major political alignment.

Second, trade, port governance, and maritime logistics across the region should be seen as instruments of security governance. Improvements in port efficiency, connectivity, customs procedures and regulatory harmonisation can progressively transform limited cooperation into durable interdependence. Furthermore, the blue economy offers an additional pathway for reinforcing economic interdependence and maritime stability.[10]

Third, regional dialogue mechanisms must provide a structured platform for sustained communication on the perceptions, priorities, and concerns of various stakeholders. This can help de-escalate tensions, minimise misperceptions, and identify limited areas of cooperation.

A long-term solution to the Hormuz problem must be anchored in multilateralism and widely accepted legal principles. While the current bilateral framework under discussion between Iran and Oman can be seen as a preliminary step, negotiations must be rapidly broadened and made more inclusive to protect the interests of all stakeholders. The only way to stop Iran from pursuing unilateral securitisation of the Strait is to shift its strategic calculus. This can be achieved through an inclusive multilateral governance mechanism that builds on shared interests, introduces positive interdependence among stakeholders, provides incentives for participation, and raises the cost of exclusion for Iran.

## Conclusion

The strategic challenge posed by the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb lies not simply in their exposure to disruption, but in the fundamental mismatch between an integrated system of insecurity and the fragmented systems of governance. These chokepoints are increasingly interconnected at both strategic and operational levels, yet international responses remain geographically compartmentalised and predominantly centred on military instruments. Similarly, despite the maritime instability stemming primarily from political fragmentation, contested authority, and proxy competition on land, it continues to be managed through naval deterrence at sea. This persistent misalignment between causes and instruments limits the effectiveness of current approaches and fuels recurrent cycles of disruption.

Addressing this challenge requires moving towards an inclusive, multilayered regional governance architecture that combines maritime cooperation, economic confidence-building through trade and connectivity, and structured political dialogue mechanisms. The governance of maritime chokepoints cannot be separated from the political, legal and security orders that surround them.

Such arrangements are unlikely to lead to the emergence of a single institution. Instead, governance will remain layered, combining sovereignty, international law, and security cooperation. Where insecurity is integrated, governance must become integrated as well.

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# Hormuz as a Harbinger: Lessons in Risk and Resilience

Cauvery Ganapathy

Iranian actions in the Strait of Hormuz represent a model of coercive economic statecraft where facts of geography and international interdependence are weaponised to influence the behaviour of states. The crisis has demonstrated that conventional military capitulation is no longer required to exert control over maritime chokepoints—instead, escalating costs enough to deter passage can deliver the strategic outcomes desired by both state and non-state actors. This article explores the precedents that weaponised interdependence[1] establishes in the domain of maritime commerce and security, and identifies potential recalibrations that could better integrate resilience to guard against such a template in the future.

## The Hormuz Blockade: Stress-Testing Assumptions

Two interconnected assumptions informed risk assessments regarding the Strait of Hormuz for over four decades. The first among these was the assumption[2] that the costs of blockading the Strait would be too high a price to pay for the Iranian economy, and the tactic too difficult to implement. This, it was believed, would discourage the Iranians from making good on their decades-long threat to disrupt transit through the Strait. A second common assumption[3] was that the unparalleled strength of the US Navy would both deter any intent on the part of Iran to exert control over the Strait as well as speedily restore freedom of navigation in the unlikely event of Iran acting on such an impulse.

The blockade[4] of the Strait of Hormuz in 2026 has stress-tested both these assumptions. Despite Iran suffering considerable losses, US intelligence reports indicate that it retains the ability to "shut down the Strait of Hormuz at will."[5] Iranian missile arsenals, though sizeably depleted, remain.[6] So do their manufacturing capabilities to replenish those missiles. Their drone-production capabilities too, though now exposed and being factored into counter-offensive strategies, are unaffected. In addition to revealing the limits of the overwhelmingly

superior conventional US military power in acting as a deterrent, this operational resilience on the part of Iran has also demonstrated that American tactical successes have not translated into long-term strategic outcomes—arguably setting a precedent regarding the changed nature of military conflict globally.

## From Disproved Assumptions to Perceived Precedents

The sheer effectiveness and easy adaptability of Iran's tactics could establish Hormuz as a harbinger of coercive economic statecraft, with several aspects of the 2026 crisis serving as precedents for modern warfare:

First, as seen in the 2026 Iran war, the changed nature of warfare has democratised the ability to inflict pain. Low-cost uncrewed systems of battle, such as drones, have changed the cost and deterrence calculus, which used to favour large and technologically superior militaries such as the US. The low costs of these battlefield innovations make them more easily replaceable and scalable as well as more readily expendable. The ability of a US$20·000-50·000 Shahed drone[7] to inflict damage on millions of dollars' worth of commercial or naval assets, for instance, has entrenched a component of asymmetric warfare into maritime security considerations today. This cost asymmetry enables smaller states and non-state actors to impart disproportionately higher costs on traditionally stronger military adversaries.

Going forward, littoral actors, for one, will find it much easier to deploy low-cost systems against larger naval assets in maritime chokepoints that naturally restrict manoeuvrability of these vessels. Through grey-zone activities and hybrid warfare, including the use of shadow fleets, surreptitious digital targeting of maritime infrastructure, the turning off of transponders, or GPS jamming, the Hormuz crisis has created a maritime operations landscape that is going to be far more difficult to secure in the future. This changed environment has also increased the risks of miscalculations and accidents in contested waterways.

Second, and relatedly, the perception of and appetite for risk will be as significant a determinant of maritime commerce and transit post Hormuz, as actual physical interdiction by state or non-state actors. The issue will not remain restricted to whether vessels can physically transit a strait, but will also hinge on institutionalised risk appetites and a cost-benefit analysis of that risk being worth it. This is a more intangible—but equally significant—deterrent, and one that Hormuz has shown[8] can be activated at will with mere statements by littoral states.

Third, the mining of seabeds has moved beyond tactical defence and offence to become a coercive strategic tool. The Iranian declaration that they have mined the seabed effectively deterred the passage of ships through the Strait. This example could serve as a strategic instrument in future conflicts to shape the behaviour of states even without adequate proof.[9] It is a threat that is particularly potent, given the scarce expertise and assets available globally for de-mining.[10]

Fourth, Iran's proposed passage fee represents efforts by the state to challenge the international dollar-based financial system that it has long been circumventing. The Iranian suggestion,

though eventually retracted, that the payment of transit fee in the Hormuz be through modes[11] other than the dollar is symptomatic of a larger trend. It is a method that Iran has used[12] in its trade with China over the years. While de-dollarisation in the near to medium term is not likely to materialise, the maturation of alternative payment channels is a model that more states and non-state actors seeking to operate outside the dollar economy may repurpose.

## Ring-Fencing Resilience

The possibility of adopting and acting on any of the precedents highlighted above offers crucial leverage, one that can be expected to be invoked by states and non-state actors in the future. The maritime risks thus created necessitate the following measures to integrate resilience:

First, multi-stakeholder efforts are required to secure maritime chokepoints, with littoral and regional states leading the initiative. The Gulf states will have to serve as the nucleus for any such initiative in the Strait. Coordination between this group of states would be key to avoiding duplication, overlaps, and seepages that could nullify meaningful efforts at patrolling the Strait.

Notwithstanding the economic arguments for Gulf cooperation in the Strait of Hormuz, there are political stumbling blocks to its realisation, including on the issue of extra-regional participation. In this respect, the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP), which offers a template on coordination to keep a strategic chokepoint open, could carry a lesson for the Gulf states. The Strait of Malacca was categorised as a high-risk waterway by Lloyd's Market Association's Joint War Committee in 2005, leading to an immediate and adverse impact on insurance premiums associated with ships and freight that transited the Malacca Strait. This had a direct bearing on the earning potential and profit margins of the countries of the region that depended on commerce through the chokepoint. Though MSP countries were initially wary about pooling resources, the economic pain point of this measure incentivised these countries into collective action to counter the threat of piracy and lawlessness along the Malacca Strait. It would be worthwhile to consider if the unprecedented disruptions seen during the Hormuz crisis can help generate a similar political will amongst the Gulf countries to guard against future weaponisation of the Strait.

Second, maritime domain awareness, through intelligence sharing and coordinated risk-mapping, must be made a pillar of any naval coordination in the Strait. It is necessary for governments and organisations to share real-time data, including on ancillary or tertiary disruptions that may affect navigability, so that the governance and response architecture can factor it in good time and be agile. Such a framework must be built on surveillance that does not wait for a crisis to begin and legal clarity that is supplemented by the ability to be enforced. Multiple platforms that engage in some of these elements of coordination already exist in the Indian Ocean, such as Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC), the EU's MASE (Program to Promote Regional Maritime Security), and India's IFC-Indian Ocean Region, Coastal Surveillance Radar Network and NISHAR (Network for Information Sharing). It is necessary that Gulf countries work towards forging effective coordination between these formats to enable meaningful interoperability.

It is also important that countries of the region and beyond begin investing in mine-sweeping capabilities, which remain woefully scarce globally. So far, Japan, the US, South Korea, the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Russia are among the small group of countries that have them.

This capacity building to develop blue water and green water naval capabilities will be costly,[13] as will be the technology needed for the surveillance of maritime zones. It is necessary, therefore, that the countries of the region coordinate to create a corpus for improving maritime security. Countries like Germany and Norway present an example, having coordinated on an investment fund[14] in the aftermath of the Nord Stream sabotage. The ability to build a multinational coalition to guard against the closure of the Strait in the future will help apportion the high costs associated with patrolling waterways and building resilient frameworks of maritime governance.

Third, existing maritime regimes and conventions must be revised to reflect changed realities. Neither Iran nor the US is party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),[15] of which Articles 38 and 44 are central to the free right of transit passage. Yet, both countries have largely adhered to its principles on the basis of customary international law. The Hormuz crisis has decimated this unsaid compliance system. In this context, it is necessary to examine if international legal regimes that govern the seas are still fit for purpose, given that they do not correspond to changed geopolitical equations or to the asymmetrical advantage that new forms of warfare may be granting state and non-state actors.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider if perhaps the least expensive and more secure, albeit most counter-intuitive, way to keep the Strait open may depend on making it profitable enough for Iran to do so. Since the use of coercive military power has not delivered access, it may be time to consider if making peace profitable enough for the Iranian state—by integrating them into international markets and trade—can create such an impetus.

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, a crisis that was perpetuated thoroughly due to high global interdependence also makes the most effective case for greater cooperation. The terms on which the Hormuz impasse ends will undoubtedly set a precedent for countries to turn facts of geography into strategic leverage.

The example it sets, however, will be as much about the weaponisation of chokepoints as it is about the need for the littoral states to create a framework of cooperative governance. Hormuz's most abiding lesson yet could be that it is only pre-emptive resilience created through cooperative security frameworks and systemic redundancies that could forge maritime deterrence such that no chokepoint is allowed to become singularly deterministic again.

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# Institutionalising Maritime Governance in the Gulf: Limits and Opportunities

Naser Alsayed

Once seemingly insulated from geopolitical volatility, the Gulf states have been drawn into direct confrontation with Iran during its 2026 war with the United States (US) and Israel, facing security threats as well as economic disruption throughout the conflict. One of the main vulnerabilities exposed by the war is the Gulf states' dependence on maritime chokepoints, which Iran can exploit, from the Strait of Hormuz to the Bab el-Mandeb, directly threatening their economic and security interests by disrupting energy exports and access to global markets.

Over the past two decades, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have made massive investments in world-class maritime infrastructure. State-owned enterprises, including DP World and the Saudi Ports Authority (Mawani), have transformed the region into a global logistics hub through investments in ports such as Jebel Ali, Yanbu, and Fujairah. These ports have become critical nodes within international supply chains.

The conflict, however, has exposed a declining maritime security in the Gulf. As major players in international energy security and key exporters of strategic resources such as minerals, the Gulf states need to adopt a new approach to maritime security. Building greater resilience is essential to ensure that these vulnerabilities cannot be exploited again by adversaries, particularly as this threatens the reliability of Gulf states as economic and energy-exporting powerhouses.

One solution could be a more institutionalised approach to maritime security cooperation between the Gulf states. A GCC-level institutional framework capable of overseeing regional maritime governance that is supported by common legal frameworks, joint planning mechanisms, and coordinated security policies could strengthen maritime security. This would also contribute to the security and stability of global maritime trade.[1]

Despite the potential benefits of such cooperation, long-standing challenges stemming from regional competition, divergent strategic

priorities, and differences in geography and maritime interests have historically prevented meaningful progress. The current conflict in the Gulf presents an important opportunity to overcome impediments to deeper regional cooperation, given the shared vulnerabilities GCC states have experienced throughout the war.

## Reducing Dependence on the Strait of Hormuz

Though the US and Israel's concern with preventing Iran from asserting sovereignty over the Strait is shared by the GCC states, the Gulf states are entering an era focused on regional interconnectivity. Lessons from the current conflict, during which Gulf states with alternative export routes have experienced less economic disruption than those that are heavily dependent on the Strait,[2] have highlighted the importance of investing in railways, pipelines, and logistics networks to strengthen economic resilience and reduce dependence on maritime chokepoints.[3]

Some alternatives have already been developed, in part because Gulf states recognised the risks created by their dependence on the Strait and sought to reduce their vulnerability to potential disruption. Saudi Arabia's East–West Pipeline, the UAE's Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline to Fujairah, and Oman's geographic position outside the Strait of Hormuz have all enhanced resilience. Meanwhile, efforts such as the UAE's to expand hydrocarbon pipeline capacity to transport more oil directly to ports beyond the Strait, have reduced GCC states' dependence on the chokepoint and ensured energy exports can continue if maritime access is disrupted.[4]

Other GCC states, however, are less geographically advantaged. Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain remain more dependent on the Strait, with their geographic constraints entailing greater cooperation with other GCC states to develop bypass options. Existing infrastructure, such as the Dolphin Gas Pipeline between Qatar and the UAE, demonstrates that cross-border energy cooperation is both technically and politically feasible. While these projects were not originally designed to bypass the Strait, they highlight the potential for deeper regional integration. Other options, like a future pipeline connecting Kuwait to Saudi Arabia's existing export network, thus providing the former access to Red Sea ports and reducing reliance on the Strait, must be explored.[5] Access to alternative ports, pipelines, and shipping routes, such as Saudi Arabia's less-exposed port of Yanbu, should also be considered. As no single measure can fully mitigate this dependence on the Strait of Hormuz, institutionalising maritime-security cooperation can provide the foundation for a more resilient and diversified regional maritime network, while complementing the GCC objective of reducing reliance on individual maritime chokepoints.

## Institutionalising Maritime Governance in the GCC: A Way Forward

While Gulf states have heavily invested in developing their individual maritime infrastructure and capabilities, Iran has been more successful in shaping the wider maritime environment in the region. The consequences of this are evident in the latter's ability to weaponise maritime traffic.

In addition to the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait represents a bargaining chip for Iran. Ansar Allah (Houthi), its proxy, has already used the chokepoint to disrupt maritime traffic and could potentially exploit it further. In July 2026, the Houthis announced a maritime blockade targeting Saudi-linked shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb, warning vessels associated with Saudi Arabia that they could be targeted. Since then, Houthi forces have attacked several vessels, including Saudi-linked oil tankers, demonstrating their ability to threaten shipping through this strategically important maritime chokepoint.

This shows how Iran and its proxies have been able to shape the regional maritime security environment. For the GCC, the challenge, therefore, is not simply to protect individual maritime assets, but to develop a more coherent strategy for shaping the maritime environment in its own interests. Two areas provide particularly important opportunities.

The first lies in strengthening maritime cooperation with Pakistan in the Gulf of Oman and wider Indian Ocean. Pakistan's deep ties with Saudi Arabia have provided a foundation for maritime security cooperation, with recent reports suggesting that Saudi investors are considering increasing investment in Pakistan's Karachi Port.[6] Other Pakistani ports, such as Gwadar, hold strategic significance, given their proximity to the Gulf and the wider Indian Ocean. Iran's reported reliance on Gwadar as an alternative maritime outlet demonstrates the strategic importance of Pakistan's maritime infrastructure.[7] Therefore, Saudi engagement with Pakistan's maritime sector can be viewed as a means of increasing GCC influence across the wider Indian Ocean while also providing greater access to maritime infrastructure beyond the Strait of Hormuz.

The second opportunity area is in strengthening maritime cooperation with states in the Horn of Africa around the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb. The UAE has recognised the strategic threat posed by the Houthis since 2015 and has sought to strengthen its maritime presence in the Horn of Africa. Its earlier efforts in Djibouti were not successful, but it has since pursued arrangements involving ports in Somaliland to enhance strategic access and mitigate the risk of Houthi disruption to this critical maritime chokepoint.[8]

As these options demonstrate, greater coordination among GCC states in the maritime domain can enhance their collective influence while complementing broader economic, political, and strategic objectives. The benefits of such coordination are evident in Europe, where institutional frameworks have facilitated cooperation among states and enabled them to collectively respond to maritime security challenges. European coordination has, for example, strengthened the ability of states to exert pressure on Russian maritime threats.[9]

## Addressing Limits and Challenges

One of the few lessons emerging from the conflict with Iran is the value of regional cooperation. The development of a GCC-wide framework for maritime coordination, however, should not be limited to countering Iran. Rather, it should enable the GCC states to use their collective economic importance to international trade and maritime commerce to build resilience against disruption and strengthen their ability to shape

the maritime security environment around them. This is particularly important given the GCC's historical difficulty in translating its economic and strategic importance into sustained collective influence over the maritime security environment.

Coordination carries a political cost. It requires GCC states to move, at least in certain areas, from competition towards cooperation. GCC states have developed rivalries over economic interests, political priorities and regional influence, which have often constrained sustained collective action. Saudi–UAE competition, including over ports and regional influence in the Horn of Africa, as well as divergent strategies in Yemen, illustrates these tensions. The Qatar diplomatic crisis further demonstrated how broader political disagreements can undermine regional cooperation. These divisions mean that any maritime institution must be designed carefully to insulate practical security cooperation from wider intra-GCC competition.

The challenge, therefore, is to develop maritime institutions that identify areas of common security interest while remaining sufficiently insulated from broader political differences. Maritime security offers a particularly useful starting point since many of the GCC states share a direct interest in protecting commercial shipping, ensuring freedom of navigation, maintaining the security of critical maritime infrastructure, and preventing disruptions to the trade routes on which their economies depend. Building cooperation around these shared interests could provide a practical mechanism for strengthening collective action without requiring the GCC states to resolve their wider political differences.

Such a framework should include all GCC states and be anchored within the existing GCC institutional structure while providing mechanisms for direct engagement with established regional partners. Countries such as Pakistan, Egypt and Türkiye, already have important security and economic relationships with the Gulf states, and could contribute to a broader maritime security network. Collective engagement with these partners would allow the GCC to pool diplomatic, economic and maritime leverage rather than relying primarily on individual bilateral relationships.

Importantly, the framework should not be defined principally around the Iranian threat. Although stronger GCC maritime coordination would strengthen the region's ability to deter and respond to Iranian coercion, making Iran the sole organising principle would unnecessarily narrow the institution's purpose and risk turning it into a reactive security mechanism. Instead, cooperation should focus on shared interests, including freedom of navigation, the protection of commercial shipping and critical infrastructure, responses to maritime disruptions, and resilience across the wider maritime environment linking the Gulf to the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean. This broader approach would allow the GCC to address the Iranian challenge while simultaneously advancing its economic, diplomatic and other interests

## Conclusion

Institutionalising maritime cooperation could move the GCC from episodic coordination towards sustained collective action. A framework built around information sharing, maritime domain awareness, joint planning, coordinated responses to disruptions and engagement with regional partners would strengthen the GCC's ability to protect its maritime interests and respond collectively to emerging challenges. It would also enable Gulf states to leverage their central role in global trade to build resilience and enhance their collective influence, making maritime cooperation a practical instrument for advancing wider GCC objectives rather than an institution focused solely on security threats.

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# India's Evolving Maritime Security Strategy in the North-West Indian Ocean

Sayantan Haldar

Once considered 'neglected,'[1] the Indian Ocean is currently at the centre stage of global geopolitical contestations. Beyond its growing strategic value within the Indo-Pacific, the region is drawing attention because of disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz since the conflict involving Iran, the United States (US), and Israel began on 28 February 2026. These disruptions have affected global oil markets and the world economy.[2] Although the conflict has so far stayed within the North-West Indian Ocean, the risk of it spreading to other theatres persists. The sinking of the Iranian frigate vessel *IRIS Dena* in a torpedo attack by the US near Indian waters was the first naval casualty in the region since the Cold War years.[3]

India's expanding strategic interests and growing economic and military prowess have made the Indo-Pacific a focal point of the country's foreign policy and security outlook. While early articulations of the Indo-Pacific in Indian policy can be traced to 2013 under former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,[4] it was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2018 speech in Singapore that set out India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.[5] Defined as a primary area of interest, the Indian Ocean is critical in mapping India's maritime security priorities. The region's salience has also grown alongside the Indo-Pacific construct. Given its central location and growing capabilities and ambitions, India has emerged as a principal maritime security actor in the region.

The conflict in the Middle East has demonstrated the fluidity of contemporary warfare, and the maritime domain has evolved as a vulnerable theatre of contest for control and influence. Given the importance of the North-Western Indian Ocean in India's strategic thinking, New Delhi needs to rethink its strategy and priorities, recalibrating its multifaceted partnerships in the region to foster a secure and stable maritime order. Leveraging India's capabilities and priorities, three areas are well placed to shape the new directions of India's maritime security strategy in the North-West Indian Ocean region: cooperation in maritime

domain awareness; enhancing interoperability among navies; and consolidating broader coalitions involving non-resident countries which despite not being geographically embedded in the region continue to hold strategic interest. These efforts would support New Delhi's aim to broaden and deepen partnerships with regional countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as other partners farther in Europe. Multimodal connectivity networks such as the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic (IMEC) corridor are one route to this.[6]

## The North-West Indian Ocean in India's Maritime Strategy

The North-West Indian Ocean region encompasses various strategic pockets including the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. Given the region's geopolitical volatility and strategic importance, increasingly evident amidst strains on global energy supply chains,[7] the North-West Indian Ocean is critical in shaping the maritime security balance in the wider Indian Ocean. The 2026 conflict in the Middle East and the security threats emerging in the region separate it from the wider Indian Ocean which, though vulnerable, is not experiencing any active conflict. These pockets are increasingly essential for India's security calculations. A reorientation of India's foreign policy appears to be underway in tandem with New Delhi's growing strategic and economic heft.

Traditionally, New Delhi has found it difficult to foster and sustain cohesion and integration in its South Asian neighbourhood. India's tensions with Pakistan on account of what it points to as cross-border terrorism from the latter[8] has impinged the scope for issue-based cooperation between the two countries, weakening regional cohesion. The dysfunctional state of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC)[9] since 2016 demonstrates the constraints on regional cohesion in India's neighbourhood.

Given the limited gains closer to home, New Delhi has sought to leverage its maritime geography by reimagining its neighbourhood to include distant continental geographies and count them as neighbours brought closer by shared maritime spaces. A maritime-turn, therefore, appears to be central in India's calibrated strategic reorientation, and India's engagement in the wider Indo-Pacific has reinforced this shift. As a result, several new regions such as Southeast Asia and East Africa now feature in India's extended neighbourhood.[10] Similarly, the North-West Indian Ocean and the littoral countries in the region have become priorities for India's maritime security strategy and operational preparedness.

## Pillars of India's Maritime Security Strategy in the North-West Indian Ocean

While this reorientation reflects a broader normative shift in India's view of the North-West Indian Ocean, the operational pathways shaping its approach also merit attention. Given the evolving security maritime agenda, India's strategic imperatives in the region are likely to be shaped by three operational pillars: maritime domain awareness (MDA) cooperation; naval exercises to enhance interoperability; and cooperation with non-resident countries in the region.

## Maritime Domain Awareness Cooperation

Given the complexities of the oceans as sites of geopolitical contest and economic interdependence, MDA has become primary to maritime security preparedness. Today, maritime security covers a wide range of issues, from protecting Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and addressing maritime piracy and terrorism to managing depleting ecological resources and advancing a Blue Economy agenda.

As a principal maritime security actor in the Indian Ocean, India has sought to herald cooperation with various countries such as the United States, Australia, France, and Italy through the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), focusing on surveillance, information-sharing, and regional cooperation.[11] Mooted in 2017 at the Indian Ocean Rim Association Summit in Jakarta, the Indian Navy established the IFC-IOR in 2018 to strengthen cooperation on MDA in the region.[12] The IFC-IOR has sought to foster cooperation through liaison officers from its partner institutions, supporting naval diplomacy and political trust alongside technical cooperation on information sharing.

The North-West Indian Ocean continues to face systemic challenges, which makes MDA particularly important there: piracy emanating off the coast of Somalia, the long risk of disruption of digital cables, and strains on energy supply chains. The 2026 conflict in the Strait of Hormuz and the use of naval mines further confirm that underwater domain awareness, in particular, is emerging as a critical node of cooperation in the region. While India has continued to pursue maritime cooperation with its neighbours in South Asia and Southeast Asia, the operational inclusion of partners such as Oman and France, Italy, and Spain indicates the growing vitality of MDA in New Delhi's engagement with these regions. There is scope for new partnerships with countries such as the UAE, through white shipping information exchange and maritime intelligence sharing.

## Naval Exercises to Enhance Interoperability

Like the wider Indian Ocean, the North-West Indian Ocean lacks regional institutions that can provide a broad framework for cooperation among stakeholders. In that sense, the maritime security architecture in the region remains fragmented.

In this context, New Delhi has sought to expand naval cooperation in the region through a bilateral template. The Indian Navy participates in a number of naval exercises designed to enhance interoperability and exchange best practices with countries in the region. These include Exercise Naseem Al Bahr with Oman,[13] and Exercise Zayed Talwar with the UAE.[14] In October 2024, India and Oman concluded the 14th edition of Exercise Naseem Al Bahr off the coast of Goa. It aimed to enhance interoperability and foster mutual understanding and cohesion between the two navies.[15] Future iterations of the exercise are planned for the end of 2026. On the other hand, India and the UAE conducted Exercise Zayed Talwar in August 2023 at Port Rashid in Dubai. Two Indian Navy ships, *INS Vishakhapatnam* and *INS Trikand*, participated in the exercise, which focused on cooperation in tackling shared

challenges such as piracy and smuggling, as well as undertaking joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.[16]

The Indian Navy also took part in the Malabar Naval Exercise with the navies of the US, Japan, and Australia in the Northern Arabian Sea in 2020.[17] Such exercises aim to improve operational synergies, and strategic trust among participating navies. As the Indian Navy expands its role in advancing India's naval diplomacy, engagement with regional navies is likely to remain a priority for New Delhi. Navies increasingly serve as instruments of diplomacy with like-minded countries. These exercises, therefore, broaden and deepen India's presence as a strategic partner in the region.

### Cooperation with Non-Resident Stakeholders in the Region

Turbulence in the North-West Indian Ocean risks affecting global stakeholders who are not geographically embedded in the region. This stands in contrast to resident stakeholders who remain at the heart of the evolving strategic equations. As a hub of global supply chains, energy routes, and sea lines of communication, the region has become a theatre shaping a rethink in maritime connectivity. With the onset of the Indo-Pacific discourse, several non-resident actors with strategic interest in the region have directed their attention to it.

The IMEC is one such framework that seeks to herald greater cooperation to forge connectivity partnerships in the region. Similarly, the tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and the ensuing strain on energy supply chains have galvanised interests among other non-resident actors to make efforts to foster a stable maritime security architecture in the region. The 2020 European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) is one such framework. Given, however, that several of the constituent countries lack the military, economic, and technological capabilities to emerge as key actor, there appear to be opportunities for India and its likeminded partners in the North-West Indian Ocean to foster cooperation. India, meanwhile, continues to enhance cooperation with its strategic partners to foster a stable maritime order in the region. India and France, for example, host the Varuna Exercise[18] in the Western Indian Ocean with its latest iteration hosted in 2025 off the coast of Goa.[19] Similarly, India and its Quad partners have brought their flagship Malabar Exercise[20] to the Western Indian Ocean.

## Conclusion

Diplomatic efforts between the US and Iran, facilitated by mediators, to end regional hostilities have brought churn to the North-West Indian Ocean. Despite limitations in capabilities, the region remains key to India's maritime security priorities. India's growing naval diplomacy in the region shows New Delhi's willingness to emerge as an actor shaping a favourable maritime security environment there. Its naval exercises with key partners such as Oman, the UAE, France, and its Quad partners underline the region's importance in India's naval outreach. It is imperative for New Delhi to deepen and broaden its partnerships in the region to herald a free, open, and rules-based maritime order. Towards this end, three

strands appear to be shaping India's maritime security strategy in the region: MDA cooperation; naval cooperation to enhance interoperability; cooperation with non-resident stakeholders.

While India appears well positioned to take forward this agenda for maritime security cooperation in the region, it needs to delicately balance the changing strategic equations in the region, and navigate the uncertainties shaping this evolving theatre. New Delhi must continue to engage with its partners in the region, even as it looks for new opportunities to embed itself in existing mechanisms that promote a free and open maritime order in the North-West Indian Ocean.

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# The EU, the GCC, and Maritime Security: Beyond the Hormuz Crisis

Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco

The Hormuz shipping crisis exposed a structural mismatch between the European Union's (EU) strategic ambitions in the Gulf and its operational and political readiness to act. While EU countries extended bilateral defence support to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners, no dedicated European naval response materialised, reflecting both capability constraints and concerns of entrapment in a US-Iran confrontation. Understanding this predicament requires situating it within the EU's broader institutional trajectory in regional waters: from the European Maritime Awareness Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission to Operation Aspides, before turning to what a long-term, sustainable European approach towards Gulf maritime security should look like.

## Before the Hormuz Crisis

### Mapping the EU's Maritime Engagement

The EU first institutionalised its maritime engagement in the waters off the Arabian Peninsula in 2022[1] by establishing a Maritime Area of Interest (MAI) in the north-western Indian Ocean and applying the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept to the region.[a] Similarly, its focus on maritime security in the Gulf region is relatively recent. Its commencement can be traced to the European Commission's Joint Communication on A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf in 2022, the first EU-level document to formally introduce maritime security cooperation into the EU-GCC agenda. It also called for a cooperation mechanism that focused on de-confliction channels, information sharing, and

a The MAI designates a maritime expanse where the EU seeks deeper maritime security coordination with littoral countries, while the CMP provides a flexible, voluntary framework for the sustained maritime presence of EU navies in a given theatre to improve information sharing and tactical coordination. See: EEAS, Coordinated Maritime Presences: A tool to enhance coordination of naval and air assets, February 21, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en.

codes of conduct, building on existing European naval deployments in regional waters.[2] The EU's growing institutional attention to Gulf waters was further reflected in the 2023 EU Maritime Security Strategy, which called for greater synergy among European naval presences in the region, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz.[3]

Initial efforts to translate political convergence into tangible initiatives took shape at the 27th GCC-EU Joint Council in October 2023, which advocated exploring inter-bloc coordination under the CMP framework and establishing a joint working group on maritime security.[4] A naval-focused working group has yet to be formalised; however, maritime security has continued to rank high on the EU-GCC agenda, including across subsequent iterations of the Regional Security Dialogues, a senior official-level grouping,[5] and the first-ever EU-GCC Joint Summit in 2024, which endorsed efforts towards a coordinated approach to maritime security in the Red Sea.[6] Progress on the working group, however, has remained limited, with only a two-day joint maritime security seminar in 2025 as a concrete achievement so far.[7]

**EMASoH (2020 to mid-2024)**

Launched in 2020,[8] EMASoH was an ad-hoc minilateral partnership for Gulf maritime security established by a coalition of like-minded European countries in response to deteriorating maritime shipping conditions in the Strait of Hormuz in 2019 and the lack of consensus in Brussels to launch a formal EU naval operation.[b] Operating from 2020 to mid-2024, it aimed to uphold freedom of navigation and safeguard commercial shipping by improving maritime security awareness[c] (MSA) in regional waters. EMASoH relied on a dual-track approach,[d] which combined Operation Agénor—the military component providing a continuous maritime presence—with a diplomatic track focused on confidence-building and engagement with key stakeholders.[9]

At the operational level, EMASoH coordinated closely with the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), a US-led naval coalition established in mid-2019 to secure Gulf maritime routes,[10] while keeping a distinct strategic posture that prioritised de-escalation over deterrence. This showcased its capacity to pursue interoperability with other naval actors without geopolitical

b Spearheaded by France, the partnership brought together eight European countries. Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway lent both operational and diplomatic support, while Germany's and Portugal's participation was limited to the diplomatic track. EMASoH grounded its legal mandate in Article 38 of UNCLOS, which guarantees the right to unimpeded transit passage through international straits.

c MSA refers to the collection, integration, and analysis of information on all activities and conditions within the maritime domain that could impact safety, security, or the environment to support informed decision-making.

d Operation Agénor embodied the naval track, while a senior civilian representative led the diplomatic one. Operation Agénor's task was to maintain a sustained maritime presence through patrols and vessel escorts, while also conducting reassurance calls with merchant vessels. Homeported at Camp de la Paix, a French military installation in Abu Dhabi, the force typically consisted of up to two surface combatants, a maritime patrol aircraft, and surveillance drones. The senior representative, in turn, focused on de-escalation and confidence-building through ongoing dialogue with shipping industry stakeholders, littoral countries, and extra-regional actors.

alignment.[11] Although the deployment of naval and aerial assets contributed to a visible deterrent presence along shipping routes, EMASoH's primary function was reassurance rather than coercive signalling.[12] By sustaining an independent maritime presence in the Gulf, it provided both operational experience and a model that later helped lay the foundations of Operation Aspides.

While it succeeded in reassuring commercial shipping and supporting confidence-building, EMASoH lacked the scale, mandate, and capabilities required to respond to a sudden military escalation at sea, and it fell short of altering the broader security dynamics of the Gulf. Ultimately, EMASoH entered a vigilant state in June 2024 as its contributing countries diverted resources to Operation Aspides.[13]

**Operation Aspides (2024-ongoing)**

Unlike EMASoH, Operation Aspides is a fully fledged EU initiative developed within the Common Security and DefencZe Policy (CSDP) framework, the institutional vehicle enabling EU civilian and military operations overseas. Launched in February 2024,[14] Operation Aspides reflects the EU's preference for an autonomous response, from the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to mounting maritime insecurity across the Red Sea basin triggered by the Houthi anti-shipping campaign.[15]

Predicated on a defensive posture, Operation Aspides pursues three objectives: protecting civilian shipping, escorting merchant vessels through regional chokepoints, and enhancing MSA across sea routes. Its area of operations spans the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf.[16] UN Security Council Resolution 2722, which called for the cessation of Houthi attacks and reaffirmed the right of self-defence against such threats,[17] provided the legal basis for the operation's mandate.

Operation Aspides draws contributions from 21 EU member states, either through military assets or personnel assigned to the operational headquarters in Larissa, Greece. The initial footprint of five surface combatants has gradually adjusted as the intensity of Houthi attacks subsided, with two warships remaining on station. Maritime patrol aircraft and surveillance drones have complemented naval operations from forward locations, particularly in Djibouti.

## Table 1: 'Operation Aspides' in Numbers

| Task | Total |
|---|---|
| Merchant vessels supported | 2·390+ |
| Close protection[e] | 720+ |
| Sailors rescued in SOLAS operations | 128 |
| Houthi threats neutralised | 19 Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)<br>2 Unmanned surface vehicles (USVs)<br>4 ballistic missiles |

*Source: EEAS, data elaborated by the author.*[18]

e For close protection, Operation Aspides refers to the escort of merchant vessels by EU naval assets that offer direct protection against attacks in its area of operations. Close protection is primarily provided to commercial ships while transiting the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Beyond its core mandate, Operation Aspides has undertaken activities spanning the broader spectrum of naval engagement. At the medium end, these include search-and-rescue (SAR) and safety-of-life-at-sea (SOLAS) missions,[f] while confidence-building measures are at the lower end.[g]

## Europe's Response to the Hormuz Crisis

### Constraints

Stronger EU-GCC maritime security cooperation confronts two orders of constraints. Some stem from the limited resources allocated to advancing intra-bloc naval cooperation, while others reflect structural institutional differences between the two organisations. Yet, both affect how quickly political convergence can translate into practical cooperation. First, both blocs are relatively latecomers to intra-organisation maritime exercises. Despite a long track record in naval operations, maritime exercises conducted under the EU flag are a recent development. It was only in 2024 that the Union launched MARSEC, its annual maritime security exercises.[19]

MARSEC remains largely geared toward low- to medium-intensity scenarios, focusing on the protection of critical undersea infrastructure (CUI) and combating illegal, under-reported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.[20] Likewise, intra-GCC naval drills have been sporadic. Following the launch of the Ittihad (Union) series in 2015,[21] naval drills appear to have stalled during the 2017-2021 Qatar blockade crisis before resuming only in 2025.[22] Besides, GCC countries have often prioritised bilateral exercises with regional neighbours or foreign security partners over a dedicated bloc framework. Second, despite both being regional blocs, the EU and the GCC rest on markedly different decision-making structures, institutional prerogatives, and degrees of autonomy.[23]

f The salvage operation involving the Greek-owned tanker Sounion is a notable example. Aspides' defensive posture proved critical in enabling engagement with the Houthis to secure the tanker and avert a major environmental disaster. See: EEAS, MV Sounion tanker safe following attack in the Red Sea, September 26, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/mv-sounion-tanker-safe-following-attack-red-sea_en?s=410381.

g These include engaging shipping industry stakeholders through sectoral forums, conducting regular port visits in Oman and Djibouti, and undertaking maritime exercises with like-minded partners, including Japan, South Korea, and India. See: EEAS, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: Co-Chairs 16th Industry Strategic Meeting in Madrid, June 6, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/eunavfor-aspides-co-chairs-16th-industry-strategic-meeting-madrid_en?s=410381. EEAS, Building Partnerships for Stability: Operation Aspides' Strategic Engagement in Djibouti, September 24, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/building-partnerships-stability-operation-aspides%E2%80%99-strategic-engagement-djibouti_en. EEAS, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: VISIT FCDR TO OMAN, January 26, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/eunavfor-aspides-visit-fcdr-oman_en. EEAS, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: Visit of Japanese Crew onboard ITS LUIGI RIZZO, May 5, 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/eunavfor-aspides-visit-japanese-crew-onboard-its-luigi-rizzo_en. EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (@EUNAVFORASPIDES), "RADM Stefano Constantino IT Navy, Force Commander of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, & Kim Jidae, the Korean Commodore, in charge of ETG 42, operating in the Gulf of Aden, recently engaged in a friendly meeting. This encounter further solidified their commitment to solidarity & cooperation," X, May 27, 2024, https://x.com/EUNAVFORASPIDES/status/1795166589341302850. EEAS, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: Passage Exercise Conducted Between ITS CAIO DUILIO and INS SURAT, September 9, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides/eunavfor-aspides-passage-exercise-conducted-between-its-caio-duilio-and-ins-surat_en.

Whereas the EU retains some independence from member states in formulating policy in selected areas, the GCC Secretariat acts primarily as a coordination platform rather than a directive body, with Gulf governments maintaining tighter national control over its decision-making. Inter-bloc understanding has advanced considerably; however, these institutional asymmetries risk slowing implementation. While distinctive decision-making processes are structural, their effects can be partially mitigated through sustained senior-official engagement, such as the Regional Security Dialogue format, and dedicated technical platforms, reinforcing the urgency of operationalising the joint maritime security working group.

**The EU's Response**

The Hormuz shipping crisis highlighted a mismatch between Europe's maritime ambitions and its operational readiness to assume a more prominent security role in the Gulf. At the outbreak of the conflict, the EU lacked both the political cohesion and military bandwidth to mount a dedicated naval response to protect international shipping and support GCC partners against Iranian attacks.

However, the crisis also revealed growing political alignment between the two blocs. The Union provided diplomatic backing through high-level visits to the region, support for the UK-France "Hormuz Coalition", and statements at the United Nations.[24] Shortly after the onset of hostilities, the two blocs also convened an extraordinary ministerial meeting to coordinate their positions, condemn Iranian attacks, and agree to joint diplomatic efforts to end the escalation.[25] Political convergence on the principle of freedom of navigation across Hormuz was further reinforced at the High-Level Forum in mid-July 2026.[26]

Some EU member states supplemented political support through bilateral defence assistance, primarily by providing air assets and ammunition to GCC partners.[27] However, unlike previous maritime security crises in regional waters, no dedicated European naval initiative emerged. This restraint reflected both tactical and strategic considerations, including the shortage of military assets to sustain deployments in the Red Sea and the Gulf, and concerns about entrapment in a US-Iran conflict. Notably, GCC partners did not negatively perceive the EU's measured response,[28] but rather as a reflection of their own preference for avoiding escalation.[29]

## Lessons Following the Hormuz Crisis

Progress on EU-GCC maritime security cooperation in the Gulf will mostly depend on the durability of US-Iran de-escalation efforts. However, both blocs should seek to insulate their engagement from future outbreaks of tensions in the Strait of Hormuz. Three measures can be considered to this end.

First, the Union should, along with GCC partners, explore extending Operation Aspides more actively throughout Hormuz. Although the operation's mandate already covers the Gulf, its activities have remained largely confined within the Red Sea basin. Aspides could contribute with MSA, reassurance calls, and close protection

for merchant vessels transiting the Strait, while providing a practical framework for cultivating structured intelligence-sharing channels, operational coordination, and confidence-building.

Any Hormuz-specific role for Aspides should remain grounded in the operation's defensive posture. The EU's measured response during US Operation Epic Fury demonstrated some strategic restraint that may facilitate Tehran's acquiescence to a limited European naval presence.[h] However, political and operational constraints remain considerable, particularly regarding force generation and the willingness to sustain deployments in an increasingly demanding strategic environment.[i]

Second, the two blocs should accelerate the operationalisation of low-political-commitment mechanisms for dialogue, starting with the joint maritime security working group. A dedicated platform for regular exchanges would facilitate information sharing, policy coordination, and the gradual development of common operating procedures. This aligns with the GCC's traditional approach to security cooperation that privileges non-binding arrangements that progressively develop the habits of working together.

Officer exchange programmes should also be explored. Embedding military and civilian personnel within respective institutions and operations would improve familiarity with command structures, strengthen institutional memory, and build professional relationships. Such an initiative would render channels for inter-bloc engagements less vulnerable to future geopolitical fluctuations. Finally, the EU and GCC should translate political convergence into operational practice through joint maritime exercises. Given the region's threat environment and the sensitivities surrounding military cooperation, drills should focus initially on low- to medium-intensity scenarios rather than high-end warfighting. By drawing on existing EU exercise frameworks, activities should be tailored to the requirements of GCC navies and coast guards, while gradually expanding to address both traditional and hybrid maritime security threats.[j]

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h Iran opposed a French-Omani proposal to clear sea mines from Hormuz. See, Gharibabadi (@Gharibabadi),"نیم رد هتفگ نورکام ماجنا ناریا طسوت افرص یدازن ،دابآ مالسا مهافت تشاددای قبط .دنکیم یراکمه ،شیاکرش یگنهامه اب ،زمرهه گنت زا یدازن میکنیم دیکا هیصوت .تسا هدیچیپ و ساسح طیارش .میهدیمن مه ار یراک نینچ هزاجا الوصا ،یرگید روشک چیه هن و دوشیم .دنکن رت هدیچیپ شتاکیرحت اب ارنآ هسنارف.," X, June 29, 2026. https://x.com/Gharibabadi/status/2071636704746750375?s=20.

i Some EU countries may be reluctant to sustain deployments in an escalation-prone theatre, while European naval assets are already stretched by other overseas commitments and growing attention to Russian maritime activity. Expanding escort and surveillance tasks to Hormuz while preserving a sustained presence in the Red Sea would likely require up to six vessels: a force package that the EU can hardly generate without broader member-state participation.

j The two blocs could develop exercises modelled after MARSEC. With the mandate of Aspides and Atalanta (the EU counter-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa) now expanded to include collecting and sharing information on CUI protection, hybrid threats such as the sabotage of submarine cables and pipelines could be incorporated into exercise scenarios alongside more conventional drills. This move would reflect the growing convergence between traditional maritime security tasks and emerging grey-zone challenges. See: European Council, Maritime security: Council updates mandates of EU naval operations ASPIDES and ATALANTA, March 30, 2026, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/30/maritime-security-council-updates-mandates-of-eu-naval-operations-aspides-and-atalanta/. Other areas for naval drills could include SOLAS and SAR operations, where Aspides has consolidated expertise, as well as sea mines. On the latter, the European Maritime Force–a non-standing military force comprising France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy–regularly conducts mine-countermeasures drills, an area of growing strategic relevance in Gulf contingency planning. See: EUMARFOR, History, http://www.euromarfor.org/overview/3. EUMARFOR, EUROMARFOR activation in ESP MINEX 26, April 27, 2026, http://www.euromarfor.org/article/1/642.

Given that GCC naval forces rarely operate outside regional waters, forward-deployed EU assets could support these training activities. Maritime exercises could initially adopt an ad hoc format, leaving national participation voluntary, before gradually evolving into a more structured framework as familiarity, interoperability, and trust deepen.

## Conclusion

The EU is increasingly willing to position itself not only as a security contributor and a de-escalatory actor, but also as an active capacity-building force in the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula, as reflected by the decision to expand Aspides' mandate to include training activities with Djiboutian maritime forces and cooperation with the Yemeni Coast Guard.[30] This trajectory suggests that the EU's strategic attention to maritime security off the Arabian Peninsula need not be measured merely by warships on station, but by the depth and scope of partnerships it is willing to sustain over time. Whether these efforts translate into a more active naval presence in Hormuz will depend less on the Union's intent and more on the broader trajectory of US-Iran de-escalation.

However, the capacity of the EU and the GCC to advance institutional and operational cooperation on maritime security will now determine their ability to insulate bilateral engagements from future regional crises and act jointly when they arise.

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*Grammarly was used for language refinements prior to submission.*

7

# Beyond the Entente Cordiale: A European Big Four for Governing the Strait of Hormuz

Giuseppe Dentice

The Strait of Hormuz has become one of the defining tests of contemporary maritime governance. Recent crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Ever Given blockage of the Suez Canal, the ongoing Red Sea crisis, and the recurring tensions in the Gulf—have shown how disruptions at a single maritime chokepoint can affect global energy markets and supply chains, as well as international stability.[1] Since strategic chokepoints serve as critical nodes of the global economy and security, naval operations can only reduce immediate risks but cannot restore traffic, mitigate wider economic consequences, or resolve the political drivers of insecurity, as evidenced by the Red Sea crisis.

Ensuring the resilience of Hormuz therefore requires more than naval deterrence: it demands political coordination across security, diplomacy, crisis management, and economic resilience. As the United States (US) encourages greater burden-sharing and multilateral institutions struggle to respond rapidly to geopolitical crises, strategic minilateralism offers a pragmatic alternative combining flexibility with political coherence.[2] In Hormuz, where regional rivalries intersect with global energy security and Europe-Indo-Pacific trade, effective governance requires complementary contributions from regional actors, external powers, and existing multilateral frameworks.[3] This reflects a broader shift from maritime security to maritime governance.

This article proposes a 'European Big Four'—comprising France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom—to serve not as a new organisation or military coalition, but as a strategic coordination platform. Building on recent European initiatives, such as the renewed Franco-British dialogue on Hormuz and the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission,[4] the European Big Four would align European positions, strengthen dialogue with Gulf and Asian partners, and improve coordination across

the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and EMASoH/AGENOR.[5]

## Lessons from European and Indo-Pacific Minilateralism

A new governance framework for the Strait of Hormuz should build on existing experience. However, no single leadership model currently reconciles operational effectiveness, political legitimacy, flexibility, and coalition-building. While a US-led framework remains unmatched in operational capability and Gulf partnerships, Washington's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific and preference for greater burden-sharing rules out exclusive American leadership. Similarly, institutional multilateralism offers legitimacy but often lacks the political cohesion and agility required for rapid crisis response, as illustrated by the European-led EMASoH/Operation AGENOR, whose multilateral and de-escalatory approach enhanced its political acceptability but did not translate into broad participation or the operational weight of a US-led coalition.[6]

Existing minilateral initiatives too, suffer from gaps, but offer important lessons. The E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) demonstrated that a small group of European powers could sustain diplomatic coordination during the negotiations for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but lacked operational instruments.[7] The Franco-British partnership combines military capabilities with diplomatic activism, but its limited political inclusiveness limits its potential as a broader governance framework.[8] This is demonstrated by EMASoH and its operational component AGENOR, which combined naval presence with political de-escalation but never evolved into a broader governance mechanism. The subsequent overlap with Operation Aspides highlights the need for political rather than operational coordination.[9] The Quad Security Dialogue (or Quad, bringing together Australia, India, Japan, and the US) offers a broader perspective, illustrating how maritime cooperation can progressively expand into wider strategic domains through regular political dialogue and issue-specific cooperation, without relying on highly institutionalised structures.[10]

Taken together, these experiences demonstrate the value of flexibility, political dialogue, and coalition-building, while also highlighting the persistent absence of a model that combines diplomatic coordination, operational connectivity, and broader political outreach. Hormuz requires a framework capable of integrating these functions.[11] Accordingly, a European Big Four represents the next step in Europe's evolving approach to strategic minilateralism: a flexible governance mechanism capable of connecting existing initiatives, engaging regional partners, and strengthening coherence across an increasingly fragmented governance landscape.[12]

## Why a European Big Four?

The principal governance gap in the Strait of Hormuz is not the absence of institutions, but the lack of a flexible political mechanism capable of connecting existing military, diplomatic, and economic instruments within a common strategic framework. A European Big Four addresses this

gap. Its legitimacy derives not from a claim to authority over the Gulf, but from Europe's direct strategic interests in Hormuz, sustained regional engagement, and diplomatic and operational experience through the E3, EMASoH/AGENOR, and EU maritime initiatives. By organising these assets more coherently, the Big Four can provide Gulf partners with a predictable European interlocutor while supporting regional ownership and facilitating dialogue among regional actors, international organisations, and Asian stakeholders.[13]

The composition of the Big Four is significant. Building on the renewed *Entente Cordiale*, the inclusion of Germany and Italy transforms a Franco-British security partnership into a broader European political framework capable of mobilising diplomatic, economic, and operational resources while preserving the flexibility of strategic minilateralism. The European Big Four therefore represents more than a numerical enlargement: it builds upon the renewed *Entente Cordiale*, extending its strategic logic to the wider Europe.[14]

Furthermore, the Big Four offers added value by combining complementary national capabilities. France and the UK contribute military and operational experience in the Gulf; Germany adds economic leverage and the capacity to mobilise EU trade, regulatory, and sanctions instruments; and Italy provides regional connectivity between Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf. Together, these capabilities provide strategic direction without creating another permanent organisation.[15]

The initiative will primarily perform four functions:

- aligning European positions before engagement with regional and international partners;
- maintaining structured dialogue with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, Iraq, Iran, and major Asian stakeholders;[16]
- coordinating initiatives on maritime resilience, critical infrastructure, and supply-chain security; and
- linking existing institutions, including the EU, NATO, and European maritime missions, within a coherent political framework.[17]

The structure should remain deliberately light. A rotating political chairmanship, regular consultations among senior officials, and issue-specific working groups will provide continuity while preserving flexibility. Under this framework, existing institutions such as EMASoH, NATO, the EU, and relevant GCC mechanisms will retain operational responsibilities, while the Big Four provides political guidance and cross-institutional coordination. Thus, the model will effectively strengthen rather than replace multilateralism.[18]

## Building a Wider Coalition

The European Big Four should be conceived as the political nucleus of a broader governance architecture for the Strait of Hormuz. Its effectiveness will depend on successfully connecting regional and extra-

regional stakeholders while preserving regional ownership. European actors alone cannot guarantee the security of Hormuz: Gulf states remain indispensable because of their geographic proximity, political legitimacy, and responsibility for regional security, while major Asian economies have a direct stake in uninterrupted energy flows and maritime commerce.[19]

The Big Four must therefore operate as a flexible political hub. The first circle should comprise the GCC states, which retain primary responsibility for regional security and agenda-setting. Their role should extend to crisis communication and the co-definition of regional security priorities, reflecting a preference for arrangements that reinforce regional agency while remaining open to external partnerships. European engagement should reinforce this Gulf leadership.[20]

Oman's recognised role as a trusted intermediary between Gulf Arab states and Iran makes it a valuable facilitator for confidence-building and crisis communication. Complementing Muscat's mediation, engagement with Iran should focus on maritime safety, incident prevention, and freedom of navigation. Asian stakeholders—notably India, Japan, South Korea, and, to some extent, China—should contribute to maritime resilience and supply-chain security, building on their growing role in preserving regional stability.[21]

The resulting hub-and-spokes architecture must connect these actors and existing initiatives without creating additional institutional layers. The success of the model should therefore be measured not by the degree of European leadership it achieves, but by its ability to combine regional ownership with broader international participation. Unlike highly institutionalised organisations or ad-hoc military coalitions, the Big Four should work to preserve flexibility while integrating diplomacy, economic cooperation, crisis management, and strategic dialogue within a common governance framework.[22]

## Policy Recommendations

The effectiveness of a European Big Four depends on four policy priorities:

- strengthening European strategic coordination before launching new initiatives;
- ensuring GCC ownership of regional priorities and work programmes;
- maintaining functional dialogue with Iran on maritime safety and incident prevention; and
- coordinating existing European and regional initiatives rather than creating new institutions.

Implementation is likely to face three political obstacles. First, France, Germany, Italy, and the UK differ in their strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and approaches to deterrence and diplomacy—the situation thereby requires sustained political commitment and credible burden-sharing. Second, external acceptance will be crucial: Gulf partners must see the framework as reinforcing regional ownership, while Tehran should not perceive it as another Western containment mechanism. Cooperation should

therefore be built on shared interests, such as freedom of navigation, incident prevention, and critical infrastructure protection. Third, institutional coherence will require connecting the EU, NATO, EMASoH, GCC mechanisms, and other international stakeholders, instead of duplicating their functions or replacing them. Addressing these constraints incrementally would enhance political feasibility and strengthen maritime governance in the Strait of Hormuz.[23]

## Conclusion

The situation in the Strait of Hormuz illustrates a broader shift in international security dynamics: safeguarding strategic maritime commons increasingly depends on political governance alongside military deterrence, as naval missions alone cannot address the interdependence of maritime security, energy resilience, trade, and regional diplomacy. The E3, EMASoH/AGENOR, and the Quad demonstrate the strengths of strategic minilateralism; however, none combines political coordination, operational connectivity, and coalition-building within a framework adapted to the Gulf.[24] The proposed European Big Four is a pragmatic political instrument to address this strategic coordination gap in the Strait of Hormuz. By strengthening European coherence, supporting Gulf ownership, and connecting regional and extra-regional stakeholders through existing frameworks, it can organise existing capabilities more effectively instead of creating new ones.[25]

Its success, however, will depend on remaining inclusive, flexible, and function-driven. Rather than leading regional security, the Big Four should facilitate cooperation among actors with shared interests in the stability of one of the world's most strategic maritime corridors. It should be seen not as an alternative to multilateralism, but as a flexible means of making existing frameworks more responsive to contemporary strategic challenges. If successful, this approach could also offer lessons for governance across other contested maritime commons.[26]

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8

# Africa's Stake and Contributions in the Maritime Governance of the North-Western Indian Ocean and Beyond

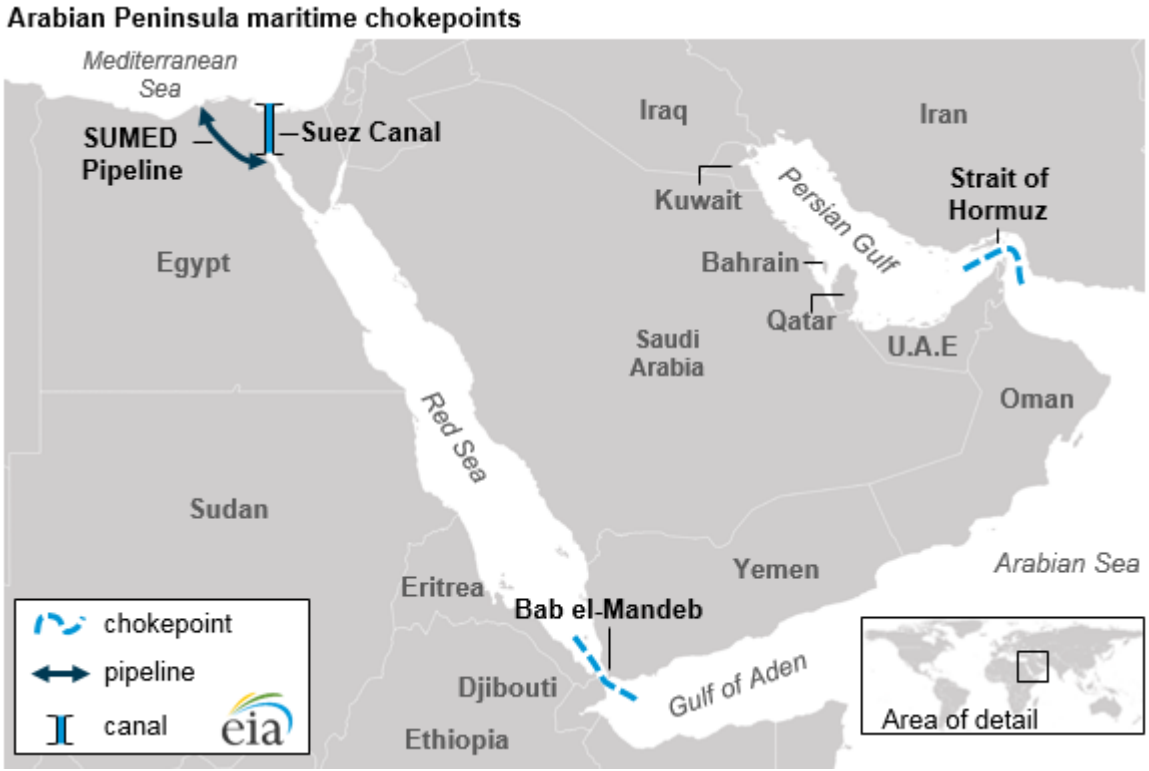
Samira Gaid

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz in 2026 has been unanimously described as a crisis of the Gulf, with the conflict between the United States (US) and Iran at its centre. Viewed through this lens, the primary actors are Iran and the states assembling to reopen the passage, the vessels that matter are the tankers bound for Asia and Europe, and the geography ends at the Gulf of Oman.

The impact of the closure, however, goes beyond. It has travelled down the Red Sea corridor to the Horn of Africa, a region whose exposure to disruption in these waterways is far-reaching but whose role in the response has been disproportionately limited.[1] The line connecting Hormuz to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait runs directly through the waters on which Somali, Djiboutian, Eritrean and other Horn residents livelihoods depend. Yet, those most exposed to this new reality have had almost no say in its governance. The gap between exposure and influence is the starting point of this article.

## A Linked Crisis and Its Costs

The case for treating the Horn of Africa as a stakeholder in the Hormuz crisis begins with a geographic fact that the dominant framing tends to ignore: the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb are not two separate challenges but a single, interlinked system of vulnerability.




*Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2017.*[2]

The connection is one of shared risk more than shared cargo. While most of the oil leaving Hormuz sails east to Asia, not through the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb still carries much of the containerised trade between Asia and Europe and remains central to Saudi Arabia's overland bypass to Yanbu. The disruption at any one strait reroutes ships, lifts insurance, and reprices trade at the other.[3]

Furthermore, the two straits are also operationally tied. The Houthis have linked their disruption of the Red Sea directly to the escalatory dynamics at Hormuz. In July 2026, they declared a naval blockade on Saudi Arabia and struck Saudi tankers, reactivating the southern chokepoint even as talks mediated by Oman, Pakistan, and Qatar circle the terms of passage at the northern one.[4] These vulnerabilities, however, predate the ongoing conflicts, which have simply collapsed the timeline within which they might still have been managed, dragging the Horn of Africa directly into the centre of the crisis.

For the states of the Horn, the consequences are immediate and material rather than strategic and distant. Somalia imports well over 90 percent of its essential commodities by sea, including all of

its refined fuel and more than half of its cereals. Within days of the strikes, fuel prices in Mogadishu more than doubled,[5] triggering a cascade that disrupted electricity, hospitals and transport, sparking widespread protests.[6] Similarly, approximately one-third of the fertiliser supplying Sub-Saharan African agriculture normally transits the Strait. The route's disruption has endangered the upcoming planting season in Horn nations such as Somalia, where 6.5 million people already face severe hunger and the risk of impending famine remains high.[7]

The Gulf contraction has also affected remittances worth US$2 billion a year, nearly a quarter of Somalia's gross domestic product (GDP),[8] while livestock and meat exports were stranded during the critical Eid season.[9] For Horn economies with thin fiscal buffers, the cascade from freight cost to food price is an existential threat. Ethiopia, landlocked and reliant on the same corridor, has seen fuel shipments stranded in the Gulf. Between February and June 2026, urea prices rose from around US$450 to over US$700 per tonne. The crisis even affected voter registration for the June 2026 elections, as fuel shortages left vital electoral equipment stranded.[10]

The security consequences compound the economic ones. The corridor that carries the Horn's trade also facilitates illicit flows between the Horn and Yemen,[11] which is only reinforced by a militarised, contested southern Red Sea. Berbera, Somaliland's port and economic lifeline, sits just 260 km from Houthi-controlled territory and has been named a potential target. This risk is sharpened by external moves along the same coastline: the UAE already operates the port and an airstrip, and reported plans for an Israeli foothold risk pulling contested Somali territory into confrontation.[12] Already, the Houthi entry into the war has turned the southern Red Sea from a secondary front into one of the conflict's main external arenas, drawing in Saudi Arabia, Israel, the UAE, Egypt, and Turkey. Meanwhile, with international attention diverted, al-Shabaab is regrouping in the resulting vacuum, and there is a resurgence in piracy.[13] While the Houthi campaign predates the 2026 war, and the Horn's dependence on these lanes is older still, the closure of Hormuz has raised the stakes for every state along the connecting waterway.

## From Host to Partner

The deepest damage, however, may be political rather than physical—a dimension rarely captured in current maritime security debates. The war has severed what little international attention the Horn still received, accelerating a gradual disengagement into abandonment.[14] In Somalia, humanitarian funding has plummeted: the US has cancelled its contribution to the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), wiping out a quarter of the total budget and deepening a Western retreat that was already underway before the Gulf crisis consumed the region's remaining diplomatic bandwidth. Sudan risks losing vital ceasefire pressure as external interlocutors look elsewhere. Furthermore, the sudden lack of international attention is driving regional instability as local actors capitalise on the vacuum to make aggressive moves over ports, political recognition, and contested transitions.

This realignment has reduced the Horn to an object rather than an actor, even as states such as Eritrea and an Ethiopia desperate for sea access refuse to remain wholly passive. Egypt and Eritrea have signed a maritime cooperation pact arguing that the Red Sea should be governed by its littoral states, not by landlocked neighbours such as Ethiopia or by arrangements dictated by outsiders.[15] With Washington warming to Asmara, external powers—among them the Gulf states, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel—are scrambling to position themselves through shifting, overlapping alignments rather than fixed blocs. The cumulative effect is a securitisation of the entire coastline, with the Horn valued mainly as a logistical base and observation zone for a crisis centred elsewhere.[16]

Despite being indispensable to the international response, the Horn is not an architect of this response. Djibouti alone hosts the military forces of the US, China, France, and Japan, among others, in closer proximity than anywhere else in the world. The naval missions patrolling the corridor—from the European Union's Operation Aspides, which spans from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Strait of Hormuz, to the new France-UK-led effort backed by European navies and hosted logistically by Oman—are designed in Brussels, Paris, London, and Washington.[17] Executed from or alongside Horn territory, these arrangements leave the region supplying the geography and absorbing the risks, with no part in the decision-making. With access, ports, and recognition now the currency of strategic positioning, a Horn that does not learn to trade on its own terms will find the terms decided for it.

## What the Horn Can Contribute

If the Horn is to move from host to partner, the conversation must go beyond the naval dimension that has thus far dominated it. While warships matter, they are the contribution the Horn is least able to make and one that external powers already provide in abundance.

The Horn's distinctive strengths lie elsewhere. The first is geography, expressed through ports and inland corridors: from Berbera and Djibouti to Bosaso, Mogadishu and the Eritrean coast. These are the nodes over which the current scramble for access is being fought and on which any strategy of resilience will depend. The second is legal and diplomatic, and it is currently the most overlooked. The states of the Horn are coastal states under international maritime law, possessing rights over vast exclusive economic zones. Somalia's delimitation of its maritime boundary with Kenya at the International Court of Justice shows the region can assert those rights instead of simply absorbing the decisions of other states.[18] Furthermore, frameworks of regional governance already exist: the African Union's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy, the 2016 Lomé Charter, and the Djibouti Code of Conduct with its 2017 Jeddah Amendment already provide the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden states African-owned frameworks against piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing.[19] The gap, however, lies in the enforcement of this architecture, which is where regional effort should concentrate.

Much of what actually secures a waterway is not blue-water naval power but the everyday work of coastal states—namely, maritime domain awareness, the sharing of tracking data, coastguard patrolling, and the prosecution of offenders. The Horn can build these capabilities at a fraction of the cost of a frigate and coordinate through instruments such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) maritime strategy, supporting the fleets passing through.[20] Moreover, these waterways are not just a transit route for other nations' commerce, and include the Horn's own fisheries, ports, and emerging blue economy. These resources are currently being drained by illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, giving coastal states a durable and self-interested reason to ensure these lanes are open and well-governed. This self-interest offers a stronger basis for cooperation, compared to episodic reactions to distant shocks. Thus, treating the blue economy as a core component of the security conversation will transform the Horn from a passive beneficiary into an active stakeholder in ensuring freedom of navigation.

The challenges to the Horn's transformation, however, are as much internal as external. Its primary contribution to any multilateral response must be to coordinate through its own institutions, using IGAD and the African Union to pursue a holistic approach that treats the Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz as a single system and factors in the national interests of the littoral states. The institutional machinery required for this has weakened in recent years. A decade ago, a crisis of this scale would have resulted in the urgent convening of an IGAD summit; however, such a summit has failed to materialise. Instead, the region is now being pulled in the opposite direction as a result of intra-regional rivalries over Somali sovereignty, Ethiopia's search for sea access, and the external alignments courting the coastline.[21]

Strategic alignments are already actively forming. When Saudi Arabia launched a Multinational Maritime Defence Coalition for the Red Sea in July 2026, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan joined as founding members alongside Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Gulf States. While this represents genuine participation, it takes place within a coalition designed and led by Riyadh, in which the Horn is member rather than an author, operating under a Saudi commander and a Pakistani deputy. To shift this dynamic, the region must act on two tracks simultaneously: individually leveraging their ports, basing options, and partnerships for a genuine seat at the table, while also jointly using the African Union, IGAD, and the Djibouti Code of Conduct framework to carry a collective position into the France-UK-led effort forming to the north.[22]

## Conclusion

The Hormuz crisis cannot be governed in isolation from the Bab el-Mandeb. Any truly multilateral response must extend its architecture down the Red Sea corridor and bring the Horn of Africa in as a partner rather than treat it as a passive coastline from which others operate. The Saudi-led coalition shows that such mechanisms are already forming, and the Horn will inevitably be drawn into them. The question is whether it enters on others' terms or helps write the rules.

The region's most valuable contributions to that response are not principally naval; they are its geography and ports, its legal standing and frameworks as coastal states, and its capacity for the coastal-state work that secures a waterway. For these recommendations to bear fruit, however, the region must first assume responsibility. The surest way for it to continue having the rules of its own front yard dictated by others is to remain too divided to write them itself. For the Horn to be treated as a partner, it must act as one.

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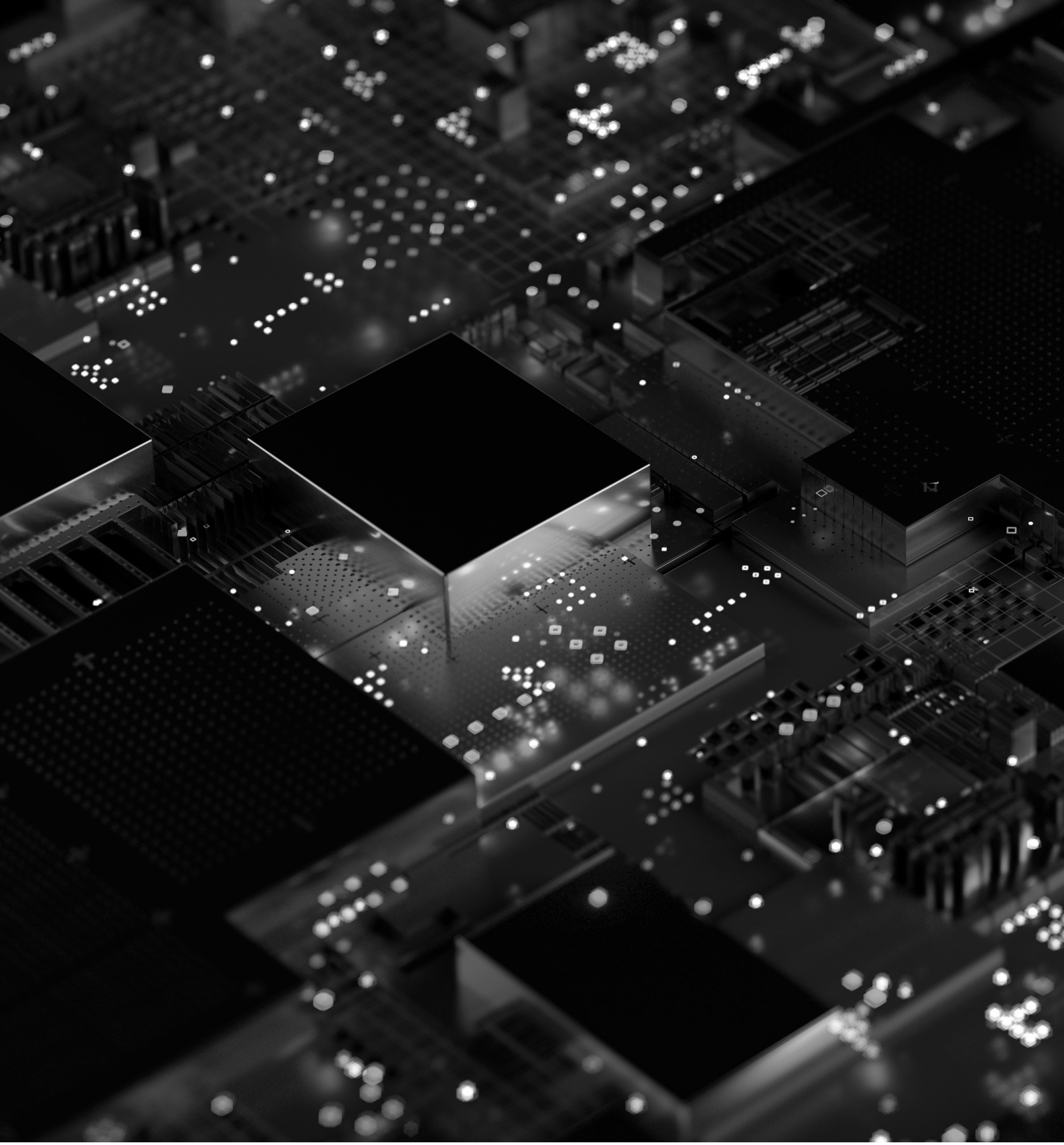
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