

Securing the Strait of Hormuz: Five Principles for the U.S.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Protecting the free flow of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz requires U.S. leadership, and it should be a strategic priority for the Trump Administration.

A coalition consisting of the U.S. and its partners would benefit regional and global security, and safeguard one of the world's most important shipping lanes.

Allowing Iran to cut off, or even threaten, shipping in the Strait of Hormuz would have disastrous economic consequences for the U.S. and its partners.

The Strait of Hormuz has received much global attention due to Iran's acts of aggression against foreign oil tankers and a U.S. drone in the past several months. The strait links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. "The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint," according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.¹ With the illegal capture of the British-flagged oil tanker *Stena Impero* in mid-July, the U.S. and the U.K. have called for creation of a maritime force to keep the strait safe for passage. If carried out properly, a maritime force would benefit regional and global security. As the U.S. works with allies to plan such a mission, it must ensure that any task force is a coalition of the willing, has strong British involvement, takes advantage of existing command structures, involves regional and Asian countries, and considers burden sharing in a creative way.

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Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. It is only 21 nautical miles at its narrowest point, and the actual shipping lane is just two nautical miles wide in either direction. Roughly 35 percent of all seaborne traded oil—almost 20 percent of oil traded worldwide—passes through its narrow confines. Most of these crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports go to Asian markets, particularly China, India, Japan, and South Korea.

Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz is particularly vulnerable to disruption, given the strait's extreme narrowness and proximity to Iran. Tehran has repeatedly threatened to close the strategic strait if Iran is attacked.

In recent weeks, tensions have been rising in the strait:

- **Thursday, June 13:** Iran is suspected of attacking two Japanese oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Thursday, June 20:** Iran brings down an unarmed U.S. drone in international airspace.
- **Thursday, July 4:** The British detained an Iranian supertanker, the *Grace 1*, carrying crude oil to Syria, a direct breach of sanctions imposed by the European Union.
- **Thursday, July 11:** Three Iranian vessels attempted to impede the passage of a commercial vessel, *British Heritage*, through the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Sunday, July 14:** A Panamanian-flagged oil tanker, the *M/T Riah*, was seized by Iran.
- **Thursday, July 18:** The U.S. brought down an Iranian drone that was dangerously close to a U.S. warship.
- **Friday, July 19:** Iran detained a U.K.-flagged oil tanker, the *Stena Impero*, in Omani territorial waters. The Iranians also boarded a second vessel, the Liberian-flagged *Mesdar*, but did not commandeer it.

Strategic Issue

The Middle East contains more than half² of the world's oil reserves, and is the world's chief oil-exporting region. As the world's biggest oil and natural gas consumer,³ the U.S. has a vested interest in maintaining the free flow of oil and gas from the region, even though the U.S. imports relatively little of its energy from the Middle East. Since many U.S. allies depend on Middle East oil and gas, there is a second-order effect for the U.S. if this supply is disrupted. For example, 80 percent of Japan's oil and 30 percent of Japan's LNG currently passes through the strait.⁴ Japan is the single largest importer of LNG in the world. A disruption in the flow of oil and gas from the Gulf be would be detrimental to the Japanese economy. This, in turn, would affect the Asian economy, and eventually the global economy, including the United States.

The Way Forward

There has been much speculation about what a maritime security mission in the Strait of Hormuz would look like. Although the U.K., France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain have expressed an interest in participating, very few details have been made public. However, as policymakers in Washington, DC, work with allies to formulate a plan, they should adhere to these five principles:

1. **The U.S. Should Push for a Coalition of the Willing.** The United States should refrain from pushing for a maritime operation within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the EU, and should focus instead on creating a coalition of the willing. This will offer more flexibility in terms of which countries can participate and how decisions are made. Furthermore, the EU requires a U.N. Security Council resolution to give any EU defense mission a mandate. With Russia's veto power at the U.N. Security Council, such a mandate is unlikely to happen. Coalitions of the willing have proven to be a very successful model for Gulf security operations to date—as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) have shown.
2. **The U.S. Should Support the Use of the Existing Command Structures and Framework.** The CMF headquarters in Bahrain is commanded by the commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, with a British officer as deputy commander. The CMF was founded in 2004 to

maintain maritime security in the Persian Gulf and the broader region. It currently consists of three combined task forces (CTFs): CTF 150 (for maritime security and counterterrorism), CTF 151 (for counter-piracy), and CTF 152 (for Arabian Gulf security and cooperation). Since the CMF is already a coalition of the willing, already has regional support, already has involvement from many European countries, and has been tried and tested, it would make the most sense to use this existing framework. Perhaps a fourth task force, specifically for Strait of Hormuz security, could be established.

- 3. The U.S. Should Support Strong British Influence in the Command Structure.** Securing the strait offers the first opportunity for the Trump Administration to work with the government led by new Prime Minister Boris Johnson. After all, it was a British ship that Iran recently commandeered, so London has a direct interest. The U.K. is America's most trusted partner in the Gulf—as shown by a British officer serving as deputy commander of the CMF. After the U.S., Britain also maintains the largest naval presence in the Gulf. In terms of permanently based naval assets, the U.K. has four mine hunters and one Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ship. There is also at least one British frigate or destroyer in the Gulf at any given time. Although such matters are not the subject of public discussion, U.K. attack submarines also operate in the area. As a sign of its long-term maritime presence in the region, the U.K. recently opened a military base in Bahrain—its first overseas military base in the Middle East in more than four decades. The U.K. has also made a multi-million-dollar investment in modernization of the Duqm Port complex in Oman to accommodate Britain's new *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers.
- 4. Regional and Asian Countries Must Be Involved.** Whether referring to security in Eastern Europe or in Northeast Asia, President Donald Trump often calls for more burden sharing among U.S. allies. The same applies to the Gulf. Luckily, for the past 15 years, the U.S. has invested heavily in improving the original maritime capabilities of regional countries. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have participated in, and in some cases have commanded, CTF-152, for example. Due to many Asian countries depending on oil and gas that passes through the strait, they should be involved, too. There is precedent for Asian involvement. During the height of the piracy crisis off the Horn of Africa from 2009 to 2013,

warships from India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and even China played a role—although often under different command structures.

- 5. The U.S. Should Think Creatively When It Comes to Burden Sharing.** There are many ways in which countries can contribute to keep the Strait of Hormuz secure. For example, the Estonian navy currently has a fleet of three British-built *Sandown*-class MCMVs—arguably some of the best in the world. Estonia has also participated in major mine-clearing exercises in the Persian Gulf in the past. Countries without naval capabilities could provide boarding teams to be based on another country's ship, or they could provide surveillance capabilities. Looking at creative ways to get smaller countries involved could go a long way in terms of broadening the participation of any maritime security operation.

Free Flow of Shipping

The free flow of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz is a U.S. strategic priority. There are some U.S. politicians and policymakers who dismiss the idea that the U.S. should play any significant role in keeping the strait open because the U.S. imports so little oil and gas from the region. This is a shortsighted and strategically inept view. The U.S. itself might not depend on Middle East oil or LNG, but the economic consequences arising from a major disruption of supplies would ripple across the globe. U.S. leadership is essential for a successful maritime force in the Strait of Hormuz.

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Endnotes

1. Justine Barden et al., "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint," U.S. Energy Information Administration, June 20, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932> (accessed July 30, 2019).
2. Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, "OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves, 2018," *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2019*, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm (accessed July 29, 2019).
3. Hydrocarbons Technology, "The 10 Biggest Oil Consuming Countries," December 8, 2013, <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/features/featurethe-10-biggest-oil-consuming-countries-4141632/> (accessed July 29, 2019).
4. "Tanker Attacks in Middle East Spark Concerns Among Japanese Companies," *The Japan Times*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/15/business/tanker-attacks-spark-concerns-among-japanese-companies/#.XUA0u-hKi70> (accessed July 30, 2019).