

From Red Sea to Strait of Hormuz: The Return of Maritime Chokepoint Warfare and its Strategic Implications for India

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Introduction

With the ongoing interdiction of shipping in the Red Sea and the increasing presence of Iranian vessels at key maritime entry points into the Persian Gulf, the world is witnessing a revival of chokepoint warfare hybrid forms. The process of controlling maritime chokepoints as a strategic naval strategy is not new. The World War I was motivated by a naval fleet-building competition between Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). Later, the United States (US) and the UK built great empires motivated by Alfred Thayer Mahan's naval strategy.

The distinguishing feature between the previous and the contemporary quest of the state's control over maritime strategic chokepoints is 'The blurring division between the state and non-state actors as both violate the international maritime law'. It must be noted that these incidents may be the initial stage of the normalisation of sea piracy and sea navigation threats once accustomed to the Gulf of Guinea, Singapore Strait, Somali pirates, and the groups involved in the Horn of Africa. The US's categorisation of the 'Axis of Evil' may make it more concrete.

Maritime insecurity has evolved from episodic disruption to sustained and systemic instability, with attacks, seizures, and the rerouting of vessels at key chokepoints, demonstrating that naval corridors are used as instruments of strategic coercion. For India, a trading nation with heavy reliance on seaborne trade and energy imports, this is no sideshow; it is geopolitically consequential. The re-emergence of chokepoint vulnerabilities requires recalibrating maritime strategy, naval posture, and economic resiliency.

The Strategic Significance of Maritime Chokepoints

A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World by William J Bernstein identifies seven maritime passages, arguing that approximately 80 per cent of global trade flows through them.¹ He further explains that the closure of any of these points would severely disrupt the world economy. He has identified the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb among the seven maritime passages.²

A high volume of the world's oil and container traffic runs through these straits. They have strategic value for three reasons: traffic concentration, geographic limitations, and proximity to littoral actors with the potential to disrupt.

The Return of Chokepoint Warfare: The Red Sea Case

This has included drone strikes and missile attacks on vessels passing through the Red Sea, prompting most major carriers to re-route around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, adding 10-15 days to transit time and significantly increasing fuel and insurance

costs.³ Civil operators have been facing increasing perils as insurance premiums have skyrocketed, and naval forces often need to fulfil escort and deterrence functions.⁴

Such developments are indicative of a shift from piracy-driven threats to those in which the purpose is not simply economic advantage, but strategic signalling and coercion enabled by proxies that can disrupt maritime flows on behalf of state actors.

The Strait of Hormuz: Strategic Leverage and Escalation

The maritime chokepoints are the nerves of global energy supply. They also function as geographical flags for negotiations and war pressure points. Tensions have resurfaced in the Strait of Hormuz, where threats to block transit, seize vessels, and harass shipping have kept the waterway a continual geopolitical pressure lever.⁵

Global energy flows through this corridor have slowed periodically amid heightened security risks.⁶ This shows that chokepoints can be used not just in conflict situations but also in periods of heightened geopolitical competition of the kind that one would expect short of war. It must be noted that the rules of Hormuz are continually being written and rewritten.

Hybrid Maritime Warfare: Changing Character of Conflict

The hybrid maritime warfare has been highlighted by the increasing integration of sea drones with traditional capabilities, such as mines and fast-attack craft, that can exert asymmetrical disruption to global trade at relatively low cost.⁷ Such tactics allow actors to act below the threshold of conventional war, continuing relentless pressures on adversaries and the global economic system.⁸

Thus, the objective of grey-zone maritime warfare is not absolute deniability but increased disruption at a relatively lower cost, thereby, harming the economic weight of adversaries. This low-cost, high-disruption approach in maritime warfare using strategic chokepoints highlights that war now extends beyond high-technology crafts and weapons, thereby, leveraging regional powers over great powers. This can also be understood as the de-classifying of asymmetric warfare with cost asymmetry, with chokepoints as a tool.

Implications for Global Trade and Supply Chains

Tightened global supply chains due to vessels being rerouted and extended transit times for some goods have raised shipping company costs, inflating energy, and commodity market volatility.⁹ Disruptions, albeit limited, reveal the systemic vulnerabilities of global supply chains to geographically concentrated risks.¹⁰

This impact extends to manufacturing cycles, inflation, and regional economic stability. However, the implications for Iran's quasi-toll tax behaviour in the Strait of Hormuz are two-fold. First, the rerouting and delays in energy-ship transits are costly for consumer countries. Secondly, a permanent or more significant re-route is not only dangerous to Iran's economy but also to the entire Gulf region. Cheaper options, such as electric vehicles from China, are already saturating European markets.

India's Strategic Exposure

As India depends on Gulf energy imports and west-bound trade routes, the intersection of these chokepoints creates an immediate economic vulnerability and a strategic disadvantage.¹¹ Maritime security is, therefore, an equally important aspect of national resilience; over 90–95 per cent of India's trade by volume moves by sea.

Any sustained disruption in these corridors could ripple through energy security, trade balances, and economic growth.

Naval and Operational Implications

Recent incidents have reinforced the need for continuous naval presence, convoy protection, and real-time maritime domain awareness in high-risk zones.¹² India's naval strategy must adapt to this evolving environment by integrating traditional sea control concepts with counter-hybrid capabilities, including surveillance, unmanned systems, and electronic warfare.

Forward deployment, enhanced interoperability, and rapid response mechanisms will be essential in ensuring the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Strategic Signalling and Escalation Dynamics

Within the rules-based international order, maritime coercion tends to occur at critical chokepoints but has an additional signalling function; disrupting flows while simultaneously affecting perceptions as a more coercive or solidified strategic end than its physical state would seem.¹³ This is part of a wider trend in which economic and military means are mixed to accomplish policy objectives under conditions of controlled escalation.

Strategic Options for India

However, India's response to this resurgence of maritime chokepoint contestation will be inherently multidimensional, combining diplomatic, military, and economic instruments into a seamless whole. On a military level, this means bolstering naval power and maintaining a strong presence in key waterways, including the Western Arabian Sea and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. This includes enlarging surface and sub-surface fleets, increasing carrier battle group readiness, and enjoying mission-based deployments. The continuous-level presence shows intended speed of response and bolsters deterrence by indicating India's ability to secure its maritime interests and protect SLOCs.

Maritime domain awareness and intelligence sharing are equally important. India needs an integrated surveillance architecture building on satellite-based monitoring, unmanned systems, coastal radar chains, and data fusion centres. Partner navies and regional organisations are also fed into this system which will provide early notification and coordination if asymmetric threats (drone attacks, mining, or fast-boat swarm tactics) become a serious issue. Given this backdrop, effectively leveraging platforms such as the Information Fusion Center–Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to

strengthen situational awareness across the broader maritime commons can yield dividends.

There are two parts to this: regional and multilateral; India must step up its game on both fronts. Through forums like the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, efforts must be made to capitalise on them to advance regimes of collective security, freedom of navigation, and coordinated maritime governance. Bilateral logistics agreements and joint training with priority partners will complement the above to enhance interoperability and burden-sharing in protecting key maritime chokepoints.

That makes diversification necessary for economic and energy security. India needs this loss of reliance on vulnerable routes and suppliers to be mitigated by scouting for more strategic petroleum reserves, investing in alternative energy sources. At the same time, establishing resilient and diversified logistics and trade networks through alternative shipping routes, port infrastructure upgrades, and multimodal connectivity corridors will both counter regional crisis-induced disruptions and position India to take advantage of a more open Indo-Pacific maritime environment.

The strongest strategic option for India is establishing credibility and rigour as the region's net security provider. This includes strengthening relations with the littoral states in the IOR. The sinking of the IRIS Dena should be a cautionary call for India's primacy over the affairs of the IOR.

Also, India should not be left behind in the 'Securitisation of the Maritime', particularly in the IOR. It is noteworthy that Japan, as a regional power, has recognised the ongoing crisis in the Strait of Hormuz as a direct test of Japan's resolve to realise Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).¹⁴ India must actively promote FOIP as an immediate strategic interest. Together, these initiatives shift India from a largely defensive posture to an offensive posture by combining hard power, with diplomatic engagement and economic development.

Conclusion

The resurgence of chokepoint warfare reflects a fundamental shift in maritime strategy, in which critical waterways like the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz have become active instruments of coercion and grey-zone competition. For India, this underscores the need to elevate maritime security from a reactive function to a central pillar of national strategy, integrating naval power, economic resilience, and diplomacy. The challenge ahead is not only to secure SLOCs but to shape the conditions under which they remain open and stable. Sustained maritime influence, enabled by partnerships, technology, and strategic clarity, will be essential for India to emerge as a net security provider. Ultimately, the contest over chokepoints will define future geopolitics, demanding timely, coherent, and decisive action.

Endnotes

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Iran Seizes Container Ships Attempting to Leave Gulf", *Reuters*, 22 Apr 2026, accessed 26 Apr 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/three-vessels-hit-by-gunfire-strait-hormuz-crews-safe-2026-04-22/>

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Article uploaded on 07-05-2026

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