

# Theorising Hormuz: Iran's Chokepoint Power

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## Introduction

International relations and geopolitics revolve around multiple variables shaped by fast-paced processes and conflicts. Aside from numerous overt and covert third-party influences, two constants form the structural foundation of geopolitics. These constants are political geography, i.e., a country's geographical attributes and the nation's control over the seas or maritime power.

The contemporary United States (US)–Israel–Iran conflict allowed Iran to leverage the above two constants as a war strategy. Iran's control and quasi 'Toll-Tax' behaviour in the Strait of Hormuz presents an exemplary case of exploiting political geography and control over the maritime domain. The vitality of the Strait of Hormuz for oil and energy supplies is beyond introduction. The International Energy Agency (IEA) has identified the Hormuz crisis as the "Greatest threat to global energy security in history".<sup>1</sup> The IEA has stated that the global supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) has also been reduced by around 20 per cent, with energy shocks affecting households, transport, and livelihoods. This makes Iran's toolkit, which comprises its political geography and maritime control, strategically more significant.

This toolkit of geopolitical constants allows Iran to remain directly relevant to countries that are geographically distant from it, thereby, distributing the costs of the war globally, if not equally. This article argues that Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz is not just a matter of states' behaviour in times of war and crisis. Rather, it has facilitated a revisit to key concepts in international studies, examining their continuities, applications, and challenges. The article builds on some of the key theoretical compasses of the discourse of international studies to make a case for an emerging multipolar world order.

## Hormuz as Iran's political geography

German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, in his book *Politische Geographie*, argued that political geography is one of the few constants in geopolitics.<sup>2</sup> Ratzel further elaborates on a state's geographical assets, stating that while governments, ideologies, and leaders are subject to change, the fundamental relationship between a state's territory and its resources does not. He emphasises the linkage between a state's territory and resources as vital to its survival. Ratzel describes this key concept as '*Lebensraum*' (living space), which remains the unchanging driving force behind all geopolitical actions.<sup>3</sup> Iran's exploitation of transit through the Strait of Hormuz shapes a modern application of territorial and resource-based survival strategies against great powers.

The narrow channel of the Strait of Hormuz is approximately 30 miles wide at its narrowest point and connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman.<sup>4</sup> The Strait includes eight major islands, seven of which are under Iranian control. It must be noted

that Iran has maintained a military presence on these islands since the 1970s. This has enabled Iran to tighten its control when required. The *de facto* Iranian control of these islands certainly strengthens Iranian influence and authority in the Strait.<sup>5</sup> This has strengthened Iran's wartime strategic position, forcing the US and Israel to negotiate and hold peace talks, though these have not been successful.

Iran exercises significant influence over parts of the Strait. Iran's passage and transit control has often been reiterated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy official Mohammad Akbarzadeh.<sup>6</sup> The key derivative of Ratzel's thesis here is the practical applicability that Iran pushed forward in war-critical times against the US and Israel through the Strait of Hormuz.

Post the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, the Strait of Hormuz emerged as a central element of Tehran's strategic survival, tied to its geography and as a vital resource as conceptualised by Ratzel. Also, Iran's political geographical playbook not only ensured survival but also became the biggest weapon against the US and Israel, while forcing the other states to reason with Iran in this war.

### **Hormuz as Iran's maritime power**

American naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, in his book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783*, identified naval strategy as crucial for a nation's great power ambitions and influence.<sup>7</sup> While his theories remain the matrix for naval modernisation and fuel global conflicts, such as China's naval expansionism in the South China Sea, described as the turn to Mahan.<sup>8</sup> Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz, writing rules for friendly and non-friendly countries' vessels, ignites a similar debate.

Iran's strategic hold over the Strait can be broken into two fragments as per Mahan's naval strategy and sea power dynamics. The first is the control of strategic naval chokepoints. Hormuz is a significant chokepoint because it is one of the world's most critical oil transit chokepoints; approximately 25 per cent of the world's seaborne oil trade transits the Strait. Also, the option to bypass it is both limited and not economical.<sup>9</sup> The second is that a nation's prosperity depends on its ability to control maritime trade routes while simultaneously denying rivals transit routes, securing islands as stepping-stones, and breaking foreign encirclement.

Iran leveraged the transit rulebook under war pressure and continues to make amendments. Initially, it was opened to all except the US and its allies.<sup>10</sup> Later, the IRGC announced that the strait was shut. Also, any ships that tried to deny their transit rights would be subject to hostile action.<sup>11</sup> Iran opened the passage route for India, China, and Russia, deeming them as friendly nations.<sup>12</sup> Iran continued to add and drop transit rules and opened fire on two Indian ships, Jag Arnav and Sanmar Herald, despite previously allowing passage.<sup>13</sup>

The contest over the Strait of Hormuz extends beyond geopolitics into maritime law. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, it is classified as an international strait where transit passage must remain uninterrupted for all vessels.

Iran's efforts to regulate or restrict this passage challenge this legal principle and revive the tension between '*Mare Liberum*' (freedom of the seas) and sovereign control. While justified by Iran on security grounds, such actions risk setting broader precedents for other chokepoints.

However, weak enforcement mechanisms mean that adherence to law depends largely on naval power, highlighting that geopolitics often overrides legal norms in contested maritime regions.

### **Inverted Mackinder Thesis**

The Inverted Mackinder thesis posits that these two constants derive from the works of Ratzel and Mahan in the due context of the Strait of Hormuz as Iran's chokepoint power. The original theory, or the 'Heartland Theory' by Sir Halford Mackinder, posits that the vast inlands of Eurasia form the heartland for controlling the world due to their inaccessibility and abundant energy reserves.<sup>14</sup>

However, Iranian political geographer Professor Mohammad Reza Hafeznia proposes an inversion of the Heartland Theory, positing Iran as the heartland.<sup>15</sup> Hafeznia's deduction, though, builds on Ratzel and Mahan's constants of geopolitics, but it also makes pioneering appropriations with respect to Iran and the Strait of Hormuz. His key basis for 'Iran as the new heartland' is its geography, which connects major international transit routes and uniquely bridges the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf.<sup>16</sup>

In this thesis, Hafeznia positions the Strait of Hormuz as not just a peripheral 'Rimland' feature but a central 'Pivot' point. He argues that by controlling this chokepoint, Iran can exert influence beyond its immediate region.<sup>17</sup> The current energy crisis worldwide, and the fact that scholars are referring to this war as the 'First Multipolar War'<sup>18</sup>, add more weight to the inversion of Mackinder's theory.

This reinterpretation also aligns with contemporary debates on 'Goeconomic Statecraft', wherein control over critical infrastructure and transit routes becomes a means of exerting influence without direct military confrontation. Hormuz, thus, exemplifies the convergence of geography, economics, and strategy in shaping modern power hierarchies.

### **Strategic Implications for India**

For India, the Strait of Hormuz represents a critical vulnerability, given that a substantial proportion of its energy imports transit through this corridor. Any prolonged disruption would have immediate economic and strategic repercussions, including inflationary pressures and supply chain instability.

India's response must, therefore, be multidimensional. Strengthening maritime domain awareness, enhancing naval presence in the Western Indian Ocean, diversifying energy supply sources, and deepening partnerships with Gulf states and like-minded maritime powers are essential steps.

Furthermore, India must invest in strategic reserves and resilient logistics networks to mitigate the risks posed by chokepoint disruptions. In the long term, participation in multilateral frameworks aimed at securing sea lines of communication will be vital to safeguarding national interests.

## Conclusion

The reassessment of Mackinder's theory reflects wartime reappraisals of the Strait of Hormuz's role for Iran. At the systemic level, it has drawn significant criticism for violating the international law of the sea, often drawing parallels with China's Mahanian exercise in the South China Sea. At the state-actor level, the Hormuz blockade and Iran's control over it have given Iran the biggest negotiating card against the US and Israel.

The US's '15 Point Plan' called for the immediate and unconditional reopening of the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for lifting primary and secondary sanctions, unfreezing Iranian assets, and supporting a strictly civilian nuclear program for electricity.<sup>19</sup> Iran's '10 Point Plan' demanded the US non-aggression as a guarantee and reparations. The most astonishing feature of Iran's peace proposal is the 'Recognised control over the Strait of Hormuz'<sup>20</sup> and a transit fee. It must be noted that the initial peace negotiations have not been very successful. It is indicative of the fact that control and toll fees over the Strait may be Iran's non-negotiables for the negotiations, at least for some time, positioning the inversion of Mackinder's thesis on the global stage.

Also, the point of astonishment is that Hormuz has enabled Iran to adopt a posture in this war against the great powers, attempting to block it as a multipolar war and internationalising the cost of war, a leverage that Ukraine or other countries in the Middle East could not achieve.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> International Energy Agency, *Oil Market Report – March 2026*. Paris: IEA, 12 Mar 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.iea.org/reports/oil-market-report-march-2026>

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1897).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Strauss Centre for International Security and Law, "Strait of Hormuz – Geography", *University of Texas at Austin*, n.d., accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-geography/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, AP, and Reuters, "IRGC Says Iran in 'Complete Control' of Strait of Hormuz amid Trump Threats," *Al Jazeera*, 04 Mar 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/4/irgc-says-iran-in-complete-control-of-strait-of-hormuz-amid-trump-threats>

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890)

<sup>8</sup> James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (London: Routledge, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> International Energy Agency, "Strait of Hormuz", *IEA*, 06 Feb 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.iea.org/about/oil-security-and-emergency-response/strait-of-hormuz>

<sup>10</sup> Al Jazeera, "Strait of Hormuz: Which Countries' Ships Has Iran Allowed Safe Passage To?", *Al Jazeera*, 16 Mar 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2026/3/16/strait-of-hormuz-which-countries-ships-has-iran-allowed-safe-passage-to>

<sup>11</sup> News on Air, "Iranian Foreign Minister Says Iran Allows India, China, Russia Access to Strait of Hormuz," *DD News On Air*, 26 Mar 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/iranian-foreign-minister-says-iran-allows-india-china-russia-access-to-strait-of-hormuz/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hindustan Times, "Let Me Turn Back: Indian Tanker Appeals to Iran Navy as Ship Comes under Fire", *Hindustan Times*, 18 Apr 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-me-turn-back-indian-tanker-appeals-to-iran-navy-as-ship-comes-under-fire-101776647212222.html>

<sup>14</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–37

<sup>15</sup> Mohammad Reza Hafeznia, *Political Geography of Iran* (Tehran: Samt Publications, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Reza Hafeznia and Abbas Nasiri-Nasab, "Iran's New Geopolitics: Heartland of the World's Corridors," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 2 (2023): 1889–1904.

<sup>18</sup> Arnaud Bertrand, "The First Multipolar War", *Substack*, 24 Mar 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://arnaudbertrand.substack.com/p/the-first-multipolar-war>

<sup>19</sup> Mohamad Ali Harisi, "Iran's 10-point plan v Trump's 15-point plan: What each side is asking for", *The National*, 11 Apr 2026, accessed 25 Apr 2026, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/04/11/irans-10-point-plan-vs-trumps-15-point-plan-what-each-side-is-asking-for/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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