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The Strait of Hormuz in Contemporary Geopolitics: Energy Security, Great Power Competition, and India's Strategic Autonomy

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Abstract: *The Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of global oil trade passes, has long occupied a central place in discussions of energy security. What has changed is the nature of its strategic weight. The strait today sits at the intersection of competing great power interests, ongoing regional instability, and the fragmented architecture of a post-unipolar international order. This article argues that Hormuz is no longer primarily an energy transit route: it has become a pressure point where maritime security, sanctions politics, bloc competition, and balancing diplomacy converge. India's position is particularly consequential. As a major energy importer with broad regional relationships and a foreign policy tradition of strategic autonomy, India faces both acute vulnerability and complex diplomatic constraints in how it manages the strait's centrality to its national interest. The article examines Hormuz's physical geography and energy significance, its embedding in contemporary geopolitical competition, India's evolving exposure and response, and the strategic relevance of the Chabahar Port project before considering three plausible future scenarios and their implications*

Keywords: *Strait of Hormuz*

I. INTRODUCTION

About 21 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum products pass through the Strait of Hormuz every single day. That figure, drawn from the U.S. Energy Information Administration's 2023 estimates, represents roughly 21 percent of global petroleum liquids consumption (EIA, 2023). The number alone is startling. But the strategic reality behind it is more complicated than any single statistic can convey.

The strait itself is a narrow passage, barely 33 kilometres wide at its narrowest navigable point, connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and, from there, to global shipping lanes. Iran sits on its northern shore; Oman occupies the southern. For decades, Western strategic thinking treated Hormuz primarily as an energy security problem: keep the lanes open, keep the oil flowing, and the global economy stays functional. That framing is not wrong, but it is increasingly insufficient.

What has emerged in the past decade and a half is something more intricate. The strait now sits at the convergence of several distinct but overlapping strategic contests: the rivalry between the United States and Iran over regional order; the accelerating competition between Washington and Beijing over global influence and supply chain control; Russia's recalibrated relationships with Gulf and Asian actors following its isolation from Western markets; and the quiet but consequential energy diplomacy of states like India, South Korea, and Japan, all of which import heavily through Hormuz.

This article argues that the Strait of Hormuz must be understood as a strategic pressure point, not merely a transit corridor. For India especially, the stakes are high. As the world's third-largest oil importer, with a growing economy, an expanding navy, and a foreign policy built on balancing multiple relationships simultaneously, India's approach to

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Hormuz reveals the tensions and contradictions at the heart of its strategic autonomy. The article proceeds from geography to geopolitics to India's specific dilemmas, before turning to future risks.

II. THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ AS A STRATEGIC CHOKEPOINT

Maritime chokepoints are, by definition, geographic bottlenecks where the disruption of passage carries consequences vastly disproportionate to the physical space involved. Hormuz is the most consequential of these globally. Unlike the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca, both of which matter enormously to global trade, Hormuz is almost uniquely concentrated around a single commodity type: hydrocarbons. This makes its disruption qualitatively different from that of any other major maritime passage.

The International Energy Agency estimated that in 2022, roughly 20 to 21 million barrels per day of oil and condensates passed through the strait, along with significant volumes of liquefied natural gas, the vast majority of which originates from Qatar (IEA, 2023). Qatar is the world's largest LNG exporter, and much of its output to Asian buyers transits directly through Hormuz before heading east. For South Korea, Japan, China, and India, this is not an abstraction. It is a daily operational reality.

The asymmetry of exposure matters. Europe and North America have substantially reduced their dependence on Gulf oil over the past two decades, partly through domestic production expansion, partly through diversification of import sources. Asian economies have moved in the opposite direction. China became the world's largest crude oil importer, displacing the United States in that role, while India's import volumes have risen sharply with its industrialisation. Disruption at Hormuz hits Asian economies harder and faster than most others.

Iran's geographic position gives it substantial coercive leverage, a point its leadership has made explicitly during periods of heightened tension. Tehran controls the northern coastline of the strait and can, in theory, threaten passage through a combination of naval mining, fast-boat harassment, anti-ship missile deployments, and attacks on tanker traffic. The United States Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, is the principal deterrent force maintaining freedom of navigation. But deterrence is only as credible as the political will behind it, and that will has shown strain in periods of complex domestic politics in Washington.

Iran has not closed the strait, and there are strong reasons why it would hesitate to do so: Iran's own oil exports transit Hormuz, and closure would hurt Tehran economically even as it hurt its adversaries. But partial disruption, harassment campaigns, seizures of commercial vessels, and proxy-enabled attacks on shipping have all occurred within the past several years. These are instruments of coercive pressure, not acts of war in the conventional sense, and they complicate any simple assessment of the strait's security.

III. HORMUZ AND THE CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

Since roughly 2015, the geopolitical environment around the Persian Gulf has grown simultaneously more complex and less legible. The old architecture, a US-led security order underwritten by military presence and alliance structures, remains partially intact. But it is being eroded from multiple directions at once.

The United States still commands the most capable naval force in the region, and the Abraham Accords normalisation agreements of 2020 reshaped the diplomatic geometry of the Gulf in ways that, at least partially, served Washington's strategic objectives. At the same time, American public and political appetite for sustained military engagement in the Middle East has diminished markedly since the costly interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Biden administration's posture and the broader debate within US foreign policy circles about prioritising the Indo-Pacific over the Gulf signals a reordering of American strategic energy, even if not a withdrawal.

China's presence in the region is economically substantial. Beijing is the largest buyer of Gulf crude oil, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum has provided a diplomatic scaffolding for deepened commercial ties. The 2023 Beijing-brokered diplomatic normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Iran drew considerable attention, and correctly so: it illustrated that China has cultivated sufficient trust with both Riyadh and Tehran to play a mediation role once considered implausible for any non-Western actor. Whether this translates into sustained strategic influence rather than

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transactional diplomacy remains to be seen, and analysts would be wise to resist reading too much into a single agreement (Fulton, 2023). What it does indicate is that the Gulf's diplomatic architecture is no longer organised exclusively around Washington.

Russia's role has shifted. Following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions regime, Moscow redirected substantial volumes of its oil exports toward Asian markets, competing with Gulf producers for market share in China and India. This has complicated Gulf Cooperation Council price coordination and introduced new variables into OPEC+ dynamics. Russia and Iran have deepened bilateral ties, driven by shared sanctions pressure and common interest in undermining Western financial architecture, though the depth of that alignment should not be overstated: their interests diverge in important areas, including over influence in Central Asia and parts of the Middle East.

What has emerged is not a new bipolarity but something messier: a competitive multipolarity in which the Gulf occupies contested strategic space. Regional states are hedging their bets, maintaining security relationships with Washington while deepening economic ties with Beijing and engaging diplomatically with Moscow. The UAE, for instance, has expanded defence cooperation with the United States while simultaneously becoming a major hub for Russian capital flows and Chinese investment. This is selective strategic alignment, not bloc loyalty, and it makes the Hormuz environment significantly more complicated to navigate, for Washington and for New Delhi alike.

IV. INDIA'S ENERGY SECURITY AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

India imported approximately 4.6 million barrels of crude oil per day in fiscal year 2022-23, making it the world's third-largest oil importer behind China and the United States (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, 2023). Of that total, the Gulf region accounts for somewhere between 55 and 60 percent, with Iraq and Saudi Arabia consistently among the top three or four suppliers. The arithmetic is simple: a significant disruption to Hormuz transit would hit India within days at the level of its import pipeline.

That dependence creates vulnerability. Not just at the level of raw supply, but economically. India's current account is highly sensitive to oil price movements. A sharp spike in crude prices, triggered by even a temporary Hormuz disruption, would widen the trade deficit, put downward pressure on the rupee, accelerate imported inflation, and complicate monetary policy at the Reserve Bank of India. For an economy with substantial numbers of lower-income households spending significant proportions of income on energy-related goods, this is not merely a fiscal abstraction. It translates directly into living standards.

Strategic autonomy, the organising principle of India's foreign policy since the Nehru era, has always required India to maintain working relationships with multiple major powers simultaneously rather than binding itself to any single patron or alliance framework. In the context of Hormuz and Gulf energy politics, this principle faces some of its sharpest practical tests.

India's relationships in the region are layered and sometimes contradictory. The Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, host around 8 to 9 million members of the Indian diaspora and are major sources of remittances. Energy imports are commercially negotiated but carry implicit diplomatic weight. India has invested substantially in cultivating ties with both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and the scale of those relationships means that any significant deterioration in Gulf stability carries human and financial consequences beyond the energy sector alone.

At the same time, India has historically maintained a policy of engagement with Iran, driven partly by energy interests, partly by the strategic value of Iranian territory as a corridor to Afghanistan and Central Asia via Chabahar, and partly by a long-standing posture of refusing to treat any state as categorically beyond the pale of Indian diplomacy. That posture has been tested severely by successive rounds of US sanctions on Iran, particularly those reimposed after 2018 when the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). India significantly reduced its Iranian oil imports in the 2019 to 2021 period to avoid secondary sanctions exposure, demonstrating that strategic autonomy has limits when the cost of crossing Washington's red lines becomes too high.

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India's response to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent Western sanctions on Moscow showed similar logic. New Delhi increased its purchases of discounted Russian crude substantially, drawing criticism from Western partners but defending the decision as a legitimate exercise of energy sovereignty for a developing economy. By 2023, Russia had become one of India's top oil suppliers, a remarkable shift from its marginal position just two years earlier (Reuters, 2023). This is balancing behaviour: not ideological alignment with Moscow, but a calculation that cheap energy for a price-sensitive economy takes precedence over coalition solidarity.

The problem is that these calculations do not always stack up cleanly. India's energy diversification, partly achieved through increased Russian imports, reduces its Hormuz exposure somewhat at the margin. But the structural dependence on Gulf crude remains deep, and a Hormuz crisis would still be felt sharply. India's maritime security interests in the Gulf are therefore genuine, not merely rhetorical. The Indian Navy has been steadily expanding its presence and patrolling capacity in the Indian Ocean region, and the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea fall squarely within its strategic aperture.

V. CHABAHAR PORT AND CONNECTIVITY POLITICS

India's interest in Chabahar Port on Iran's southeastern coast has been a consistent if complicated thread in its Gulf strategy. The logic is straightforward: a developed Chabahar gives India direct sea access to Iran, from which it can reach Afghanistan and, by extension, Central Asian markets overland, bypassing Pakistan entirely. Given that Pakistan has consistently denied India overland transit rights, Chabahar represents the only viable alternative route for Indian goods to reach landlocked Central Asian economies.

India has invested in the development of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar, and the port has processed Indian cargo. But characterising the project as a success story, or as the counter to China's Gwadar Port that some analysts have framed it as, would be premature. Sanctions-related complications have slowed equipment procurement, deterred Indian private sector participation, and created uncertainty about the financial and logistical pipeline required for the port to operate at meaningful scale. Foreign private firms have been reluctant to engage given the risk of US secondary sanctions exposure.

The Biden administration's decision in 2024 to grant a specific sanctions waiver for Chabahar was a significant development, recognising the port's connectivity value and India's strategic interest in the region (U.S. Department of State, 2024). That waiver created some operational breathing room. But it was a waiver, not a permanent exemption, and it remains subject to the broader trajectory of US-Iran relations, which continued to be tense. The Trump administration's return to office added renewed uncertainty about whether the waiver framework would be maintained.

Central Asia presents a genuine commercial opportunity. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and other landlocked states have strong interest in diversifying their trade routes and reducing dependence on Russian and Chinese transit corridors. India has cultivated engagement through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which runs through Iran, as well as through bilateral diplomatic outreach. But converting strategic interest into operating commercial volume requires sustained investment, resolution of the sanctions constraint, and Iranian administrative capacity. None of these is guaranteed.

What Chabahar represents, ultimately, is strategic optionality. It keeps a route alive, maintains Indian engagement with Iran even in a difficult period, and signals to Central Asian partners that New Delhi is a credible connectivity option. Whether it becomes a genuine trade artery depends on factors that are partly outside India's control. Treating it as a geopolitical masterstroke would be as misleading as dismissing it as irrelevant.

VI. PAKISTAN AND REGIONAL POSITIONING

Pakistan's relevance to the Hormuz question is often exaggerated in popular commentary and sometimes in academic analysis. Pakistan does not border the strait, does not control any naval choke-points relevant to Hormuz transit, and is not a member of any formal security arrangement that gives it direct influence over Gulf dynamics.

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What Pakistan does have is a historically close relationship with Saudi Arabia, rooted in financial support, diaspora remittances, and religious affinity. That relationship has frayed somewhat in recent years, as Riyadh diversified its partnerships and as Pakistan's economic instability made it a less reliable partner. Relations with the UAE have also been managed carefully through periods of political turbulence in Islamabad. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) development, anchored at Gwadar Port, gives Pakistan a connection to broader Chinese maritime strategy, but Gwadar's operational development has faced substantial difficulties.

The relevant question for this article is narrower: does Pakistan's regional positioning affect India's strategic calculus around Hormuz? Indirectly, yes. Pakistan's geographic position means that in any serious regional conflict scenario, its behaviour would have implications for Indian naval operations and overland logistics. The China-Pakistan relationship introduces a layer of potential strategic coordination that India's planners must account for. But Pakistan is not a driver of Hormuz dynamics. It is a complicating variable in India's regional environment, not a principal actor in Gulf security architecture.

VII. FUTURE SCENARIOS AND STRATEGIC RISKS

Thinking in scenarios is not about predicting the future. It is about stress-testing assumptions and preparing for discontinuities. Three broad scenarios are worth considering for the Hormuz environment over the next decade.

Scenario One: Managed Stability

In the most benign scenario, the current fragile equilibrium holds. US naval presence continues to deter major disruptions. Gulf states hedge successfully between Washington and Beijing. Iran remains under sanctions pressure but avoids actions that would trigger direct military confrontation. The JCPOA or some successor framework produces partial sanctions relief and reduced tensions. Regional actors, including the Houthi movement in Yemen and various Iranian-backed militias, continue low-level harassment of shipping but do not escalate to a point that triggers systemic disruption.

For India, this scenario is manageable. Energy imports continue at elevated cost due to Gulf risk premiums and geopolitical uncertainty, but supply chains remain functional. The Indian Navy continues capacity expansion in the Indian Ocean. Chabahar develops incrementally. Diplomatic hedging across the US-Iran-Gulf triangle continues to work, though without producing decisive breakthroughs. Inflation pressures from oil prices remain a recurring but not acute challenge.

Scenario Two: Limited Escalation

A more turbulent scenario involves a significant escalation event that stops short of full conflict. This could take several forms: a major Iranian-linked attack on Gulf oil infrastructure, an exchange of military strikes between Israel and Iran that widens to involve Gulf shipping lanes, or a serious naval confrontation in or near the strait. The Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping that began in late 2023, while not originating at Hormuz, illustrated how quickly regional conflict dynamics can translate into tanker insurance costs, shipping route changes, and energy price volatility (Reuters, 2024).

For India, limited escalation would mean immediate upward pressure on crude import prices, disruption to shipping schedules, significant rupee depreciation, and a sharp policy dilemma. New Delhi would face pressure from Washington to take sides, or at least to signal alignment, while simultaneously needing to manage its relationships with Gulf states and Iran. The diaspora dimension would become acute if Indian workers in the Gulf faced security threats or evacuation needs. India has conducted such evacuations before, most notably Operation Raahat in Yemen in 2015, but a Gulf-wide crisis of greater scale would be far more demanding. Strategic autonomy, in this scenario, would be tested not just rhetorically but operationally.

Scenario Three: Severe Disruption

The most extreme scenario involves a sustained closure or near-closure of the Strait of Hormuz for weeks or months. This has not occurred in modern history, and there are strong structural reasons why even hostile actors have incentives to avoid it. But it cannot be excluded from strategic planning. A direct military conflict between the United States and

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Iran, or an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities that triggers retaliatory escalation, could produce conditions in which normal deterrence calculations break down.

A closure lasting even two to three weeks would send global energy markets into crisis. The strategic petroleum reserves of the United States and IEA member countries would be activated, but their combined drawdown capacity has limits, and Asian economies, which do not participate fully in IEA coordinated releases, would be acutely exposed. India's strategic petroleum reserves remain limited relative to its import scale: as of recent estimates, they cover somewhere between nine and ten days of consumption (Petroleum Ministry, 2022). That buffer would evaporate quickly.

The economic consequences for India would be severe: double-digit inflation, a collapsing rupee, widening current account deficit, potential sovereign credit stress, and serious political instability. The diplomatic consequences would be equally complex. India would face impossible choices between competing partners and no good options. Naval preparedness, which has been improving, would face its first serious operational test in a crisis not of India's choosing and not on its preferred terms.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Strait of Hormuz has always mattered. What has changed is how it matters, and to whom, and through what channels. The strait is no longer simply an artery that global markets depend on; it is a node where energy flows, military posture, sanctions architecture, and great power competition intersect in ways that cannot be disentangled from one another.

For India, the implications are significant and not always comfortable. A country of its size, ambition, and import dependence cannot afford to treat Hormuz as someone else's problem. It sits too close to the centre of India's energy calculus, its regional relationships, and its emerging maritime identity. The balancing act that strategic autonomy requires, maintaining ties with the United States, Iran, Russia, and the Gulf states simultaneously, will become harder as great power competition intensifies and the costs of non-alignment with any particular bloc rise.

Chabahar offers partial mitigation but not salvation. Diplomacy offers tools but not solutions. Naval expansion strengthens India's hand but does not eliminate its exposure. What India needs, beyond these specific instruments, is a sustained strategic conversation about Hormuz: about what levels of dependence are acceptable, what naval capacities are required, what diplomatic red lines exist, and what the actual cost of a disruption would be if it arrived without warning.

That conversation is beginning to happen within Indian policy circles, and this article is a small contribution to it. The strait is not going to become less important. The competition around it is not going to simplify. India's choices in navigating that environment will, in part, define what kind of power it becomes.

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