

India and the Strait of Hormuz

Strategic Vulnerabilities and Policy Responses in a Shifting Regional Order

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The Strait of Hormuz, a vital global energy chokepoint, is crucial for India's energy security as more than two-thirds of India's oil imports pass through this route.¹ This article examines India's strategic interests in the strait amid escalating geopolitical tensions, including US–Iran confrontations, China's expanding regional presence through initiatives like BRI and Gwadar Port, and persistent asymmetric threats like Houthi attacks. Analysing India's multi-dimensional response—naval deployments (Operation Sankalp²), energy diversification efforts, and diplomatic balancing between Iran and Gulf states—the study reveals significant vulnerabilities: over-reliance on the strait, limited naval logistics in the Gulf, and absence of regional security frameworks. The research highlights emerging alternatives like India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), while arguing that India must enhance maritime domain awareness, develop forward operating capabilities, and lead minilateral security initiatives to protect its interests. The findings contribute to understanding how rising powers navigate critical chokepoints amidst great power competition, offering policy recommendations for India to secure its energy lifelines while maintaining strategic autonomy in an increasingly contested maritime domain.

Keywords: Strait of Hormuz; India; Energy Security; Geopolitics; Chokepoint Diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime passage linking the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean, has long been considered one of the world’s most critical chokepoints for global energy trade.³ Approximately 20 per cent of the world’s petroleum, amounting to over 20 million barrels per day (see Table 1 and Figure 1), transits through this strait, making its uninterrupted access vital to energy-importing nations.⁴ Over 80 per cent of the oil transported through the Strait is consumed by Asia, of which China, India, Japan and South Korea account for around 65 per cent.⁵

Table 1 Volume of crude oil, condensate and petroleum products transported through the Strait of Hormuz, 2020 - 1Q2025 (million b/d)

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	1Q25
Total oil flows through Strait of Hormuz	19.1	19.4	21.4	21.4	20.3	20.1
Crude and Condensate	14.3	14.4	16.0	15.5	14.3	14.2
Petroleum Products	4.8	5.0	5.5	5.8	5.9	5.9

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration analysis based on Vortexa.

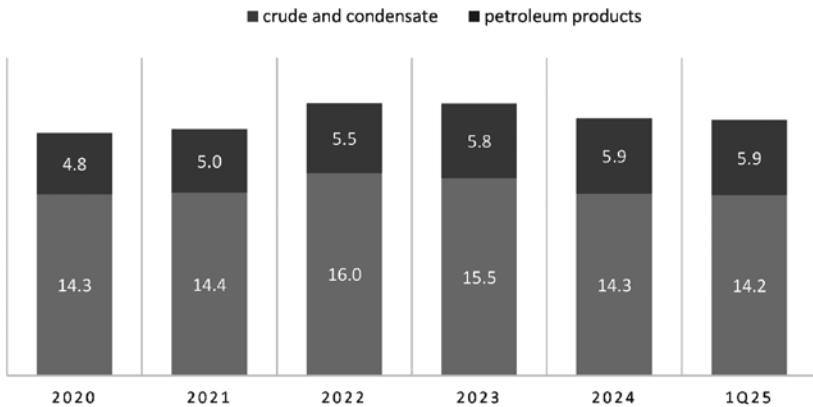


Figure 1 Volume of total oil petroleum liquids transported through the Strait of Hormuz million barrels per day

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration analysis based on Vortexa tanker tracking (Note: 1Q25 = first quarter of 2025)

Given India's growing energy demands, its heavy reliance on Gulf-based suppliers, and its aspiration to be a dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overstated. From an economic standpoint, India's dependency on West Asian crude oil and gas remains indispensable. According to the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (2025), nearly 40 per cent⁶ of India's oil imports come from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, notably Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates.⁷ Although the quantity of oil imported from the Gulf has come down due to availability of cheaper options from elsewhere, and sanctions on Iran, yet it will always remain indispensable due to rising energy demand in India and nearness of the source from Indian ports. These imports are funnelled through the Strait of Hormuz, making the stability and security of this waterway a national security concern. Any disruption whether due to conflict, piracy, or embargo has immediate ramifications on India's energy security, inflation and balance of payments. Iran's recent threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, triggered by escalating tensions with the United States, carries significant geopolitical and economic implications. While Tehran has periodically used this threat as leverage in regional conflicts, it remains debatable whether it would be executed, because a closure would not only disrupt global energy flows but also cause severe harm to Iran's own oil exports and critical infrastructure, which largely depend on the same waterway. A sustained closure would also strain Iran's pivotal energy ties with key partners like China and could provoke overwhelming international military and economic countermeasures, making it strategically costly for Tehran. In the present context, mitigating mechanisms exist but remain politically contingent. Expanded Venezuelan exports under calibrated sanctions relief, or flexible enforcement of restrictions on Russian energy flows, could partially stabilise global supply. However, production constraints, logistical bottlenecks and geopolitical considerations limit the immediacy of such adjustments. Consequently, energy markets respond less to actual supply loss and more to escalation risk premiums, rendering volatility a function of political signalling rather than physical disruption. For India, a major energy-importing nation, any disruption in the Hormuz transit corridor could lead to elevated crude oil and LNG prices, thereby exacerbating the current account deficit and inflating domestic energy costs.⁸ Thus, necessitating the enhanced maritime vigilance, energy diversification and diplomatic engagement for India.

Geopolitically, the Strait represents more than just a transit route, it is a critical vector in the global balance of power. Situated at the confluence of

several volatile states and heavily militarised by regional and extra-regional powers, the Strait serves as a barometer of wider geopolitical tensions. Historically, the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) witnessed the “Tanker War”, wherein both countries targeted oil shipments, demonstrating how quickly the security of the strait can be compromised.⁹ India’s historical engagement with the region further deepens the strait’s relevance. From ancient maritime trade routes linking the Indus Valley Civilisation with Mesopotamia, to the colonial and postcolonial eras of oil diplomacy, India has always been connected to the Persian Gulf through trade, culture and strategic concerns.¹⁰ In modern times, the Indian diaspora across Gulf states numbering over 9 million serves not only as a socio-economic bridge but also as a geopolitical anchor for India’s stakes in regional stability.¹¹ Remittances from the Gulf form a significant part of India’s foreign exchange earnings, nearly 38 per cent of US\$ 118.7 billion¹² with Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh being key beneficiary states. Thus, the Strait of Hormuz is a symbolic passage linking the safety of Indian citizens abroad to national prosperity and security.

Scholars such as Talmiz Ahmad, former Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Oman, have argued that India’s Gulf policy must transcend transactional energy relations and instead evolve into a comprehensive maritime strategy anchored in security partnerships and multilateralism.¹³ The Strait of Hormuz, in this context, becomes a test case for India’s broader aspirations in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. Moreover, C. Raja Mohan, a leading Indian foreign policy analyst and Senior Fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute, emphasises that the Gulf is no longer a peripheral interest but a “strategic near abroad”, requiring robust maritime engagement and sustained naval presence.¹⁴

In light of growing Chinese influence in the Gulf through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and security partnerships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, India’s maritime calculus has grown more complex. China’s recent mediation in the Iran–Saudi détente and its increasing port acquisitions (such as Gwadar in Pakistan and potential interest in Chabahar) signal an expanded strategic footprint in India’s traditional area of influence. As noted by Oriana Skylar Mastro of Stanford University, the Strait of Hormuz is now an arena of competition not just between regional actors but also great powers seeking to influence maritime corridors.¹⁵

India’s strategic community has recognised the need for a multipronged approach¹⁶ to secure energy supply chains, strengthen maritime resilience, and maintain strategic autonomy in a volatile Gulf environment. The Indian Navy’s doctrine emphasises ‘mission-based deployments’ to project presence

and ensure quick response in strategic hotspots, including the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.¹⁷ The operationalisation of the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) reflects a deliberate shift from reactive naval deployment to institutionalised maritime domain awareness (MDA) as a core instrument of strategic engagement. India's intent over the past two decades has been clear: to secure sea lines of communication vital for energy imports, safeguard its large diaspora in the Gulf, counter maritime terrorism, and prevent destabilising extra-regional interference in the Indian Ocean. Capability development has correspondingly evolved through expanded surveillance networks, white-shipment agreements, logistics support arrangements, and participation in coordinated patrols and multilateral exercises. During Operation Sankalp, the deployment of guided-missile destroyers and maritime reconnaissance aircraft demonstrated not only operational readiness but also continuity in India's long-standing objective of protecting commercial shipping without escalation. These measures build upon earlier lessons from piracy off the Horn of Africa and the post-2008 maritime security recalibration, underscoring a sustained effort to close surveillance gaps, enhance interoperability, and institutionalise cooperative security frameworks across the region.

In addition to diversifying energy sources and routes, India has increased crude imports from the United States, Russia, West Africa, and Latin America to reduce dependence on Gulf producers (Figure 2). However, diversification is constrained by logistical and structural realities. Geographic proximity to the Gulf lowers freight costs and supports competitive refinery gate prices. At the same time, Asian buyers, including India, have historically paid an 'Asian Premium', particularly in purchases from Saudi Arabia, where official selling prices for Asian markets often exceed those for Western buyers.¹⁸ Although discounted Russian crude has temporarily eased pricing pressures, refinery configurations, long-term contracts, and established supply chains continue to anchor India to Gulf suppliers. Consequently, the Gulf and by extension the Strait of Hormuz remains strategically indispensable in the short to medium term. Maritime scholars such as Geoffrey Till, particularly in *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*¹⁹, argue that chokepoint vulnerability demands more than naval deterrence; it requires diplomatic foresight, redundancy planning and economic resilience. In this framework, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a military challenge but a structural dependency problem. Reducing its disruptive potential therefore necessitates diversification of both routes and instruments. One long-term mitigation strategy could involve expanding cross-Gulf oil and gas pipeline networks

linking Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE to export terminals on Oman's Indian Ocean coast, thereby bypassing the narrowest segment of the Strait. While politically sensitive, particularly from Iran's perspective, such infrastructure would not eliminate Hormuz's relevance but could dilute its coercive leverage by reducing concentration risk. Similar bypass mechanisms already exist in limited form, suggesting that incremental expansion, rather than wholesale redesign, may be the more geopolitically feasible pathway towards resilience.

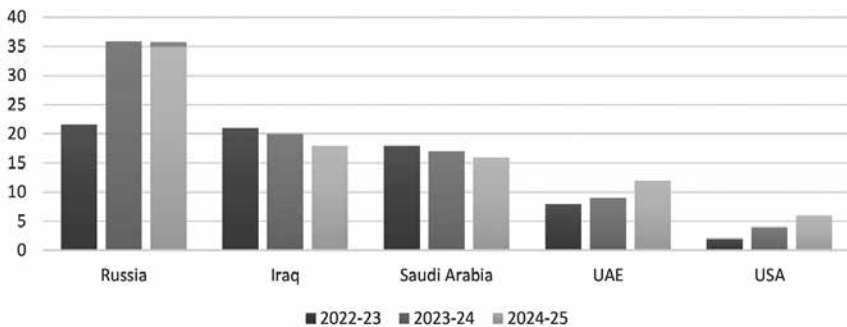


Figure 2 Country-wise Share (%) of India's Crude Oil Imports—
FY 2022–23 to FY 2024–25

Source: DGCI&S data.

India's active engagement with regional platforms like I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, United States) reflects a strategic calculus shaped by shared economic, infrastructural and security imperatives that transcend what any single state can achieve unilaterally. India is driven by multiple, overlapping compulsions: the need to secure resilient supply chains for critical commodities, expand market access for its goods and services, and build cooperative frameworks that can underwrite stability in an economically interdependent West Asia. In the energy domain, collaborative initiatives under I2U2 such as joint investments in renewable infrastructure and food systems indirectly reinforce maritime interests by diversifying economic linkages and reducing dependence on single corridors.²⁰ Furthermore, in a region marked by overlapping security challenges, platforms like I2U2 enable India to pool capabilities with partners that possess advanced technological, financial and diplomatic leverage, thereby enhancing deterrence without direct military engagement. In essence, India's participation signals a broader shift towards networked security, where economic cooperation, diplomatic alignment and

shared threat perceptions converge to protect national interests in a complex and contested maritime and geo-economic environment.²¹ Furthermore, India's ongoing investment in the Chabahar Port in Iran aims to establish an alternative access route to Central Asia and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. This port, while not directly connected to bypassing the Strait, enhances India's maritime outreach and underlines the interconnected nature of regional maritime strategy.

Despite these measures, significant challenges remain. India's capacity to act independently in the Strait of Hormuz is constrained by limited naval logistics in the Gulf, absence of formal security alliances, and the unpredictability of US–Iran relations, which can derail regional stability overnight.²² The broader regional order is also being reshaped by normalisation between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain under the Abraham Accords, creating new axes of cooperation and exclusion that India must navigate carefully.

CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ

The contemporary geopolitical environment surrounding the Strait of Hormuz is marked by increasing volatility, contested influence, and the strategic recalibration of regional and extra-regional actors.²³ For India, whose energy security and maritime connectivity are deeply enmeshed with the uninterrupted functioning of this chokepoint, recent developments pose multi-dimensional challenges.²⁴ The resurgence of tensions between Iran and the United States following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 has once again placed the strait at the epicentre of great power contestation.²⁵ The recent escalation in US–Iran tensions, particularly following US strikes on Iranian nuclear infrastructure and Iran's continued backing of regional proxy groups such as the Houthis, has revived Tehran's long-standing signalling about potential disruptions to maritime supply chains in the Red Sea and adjoining waters. While earlier episodes of crisis including the aftermath of General Qassem Soleimani's targeted killing demonstrated how rapidly regional flashpoints can translate into maritime insecurity, more recent Israeli strikes reportedly decimating segments of Iran-aligned leadership structures in 2025 have added a new layer of volatility.²⁶ These developments collectively underscore that maritime disruption threats in West Asia are rarely isolated events; rather, they are embedded within a broader cycle of proxy confrontation, deterrence

signalling, and retaliatory escalation that periodically heightens risks to commercial shipping without necessarily culminating in full-scale war. The current geopolitical climate is even more volatile, with heightened regional hostilities involving Israel, the US and Iran-backed militias across Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Iran's parliament has now signalled support for closing the strait, underscoring the possibility of a deliberate disruption of maritime traffic, which could severely impact global energy flows and regional security architecture. From a realist perspective, the anarchic nature of international politics and the primacy of self-help underscore why Iran views control over the Strait as a coercive bargaining tool, particularly when confronted with economic sanctions and strategic encirclement.

The geopolitical calculus has been further complicated by the increasing frequency of asymmetric maritime threats, particularly Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Oman.²⁷ Though these attacks occur outside the immediate area of the strait, their ripple effects have contributed to regional insecurity. The Houthis, backed by Iran, have used missile and drone strikes to signal Tehran's strategic depth and influence across maritime corridors. This expansion of proxy conflict into maritime zones complicates the traditional understanding of state-centric threats and introduces what Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver in their securitization theory refer to as 'societal' and 'non-state' security threats that blur the lines between war and peace.²⁸ For India, these dynamics increase the operational risks for its shipping and tanker fleets, elevate insurance premiums, and necessitate greater naval vigilance in extended zones of operation.

The militarisation of the Gulf region is another pressing concern.²⁹ The US Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain, British and French naval deployments, and the expanding maritime footprint of China collectively illustrate a region increasingly dominated by hard power assertions.³⁰ China's recent maritime security agreement with Iran and its active involvement in Gulf port infrastructure projects signal Beijing's intent to challenge the US-centric security architecture in the region.³¹ From a balance of power perspective, such shifts invite new rivalries and hedging strategies. India, traditionally wary of formal alliances, must now recalibrate its position amidst this fluid power matrix.³² While India has intensified joint naval exercises with France, the UAE and the US, its lack of permanent logistical facilities in the Gulf remains a structural limitation. Strategic autonomy, a long-held tenet of India's foreign policy, is being tested in a maritime theatre where reliance on multilateral coordination and naval interoperability is growing.³³

Equally transformative are the evolving political alignments in the Gulf. The Abraham Accords, the normalisation of relations between Israel and states such as the UAE and Bahrain, and the China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia indicate a recalibration of regional rivalries. However, this reordering remains fluid. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to cooperate on security and economic matters, policy differences have surfaced in areas such as oil production strategy within OPEC+, approaches to regional conflicts, and competition over investment and trade hubs. If such divergences persist, they may limit the depth of collective security coordination, including maritime responses to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, underscoring that Gulf alignment is pragmatic rather than fully consolidated.³⁴

For India, which maintains close ties with both the Gulf Arab monarchies and Iran, navigating this shifting alliance structure requires a delicate diplomatic balance. This complexity is further accentuated by recent developments such as the formalisation of a Saudi–Pakistan defence pact, alongside Pakistan’s longstanding security presence in countries like Qatar and Bahrain, which reflect enduring strategic linkages within the Gulf security architecture. While these arrangements do not necessarily undermine India’s position, they add an additional layer of geopolitical calculation in a region marked by overlapping partnerships.³⁵ Theoretical insights from liberal institutionalism underscore the importance of rule-based engagement and cooperative mechanisms in stabilising such regions; however, the erosion of multilateral diplomacy in West Asia suggests that flexible, interest-driven alignments are increasingly shaping regional order.

Adding to the fluidity is the emergence of new regional actors and forums. The I2U2 grouping illustrates an attempt to create alternative frameworks for economic and strategic cooperation that also have maritime dimensions.³⁶ Though not explicitly focused on the Strait of Hormuz, such platforms reflect the recognition that security in one part of the region cannot be decoupled from developments elsewhere. This interdependence aligns with complex interdependence theory, as articulated by Keohane and Nye,³⁷ where economic, security and societal dimensions are deeply intertwined and cannot be analysed in isolation. For India, participating in such minilateral platforms including groupings like I2U2 and initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) offers opportunities for burden-sharing, capacity-building, infrastructure connectivity, and strategic signalling, even as it seeks to avoid direct entanglement in great-power rivalries.

Moreover, the growing perception of US strategic retrenchment from the Middle East has induced regional actors to diversify their partnerships. The Gulf monarchies are increasingly adopting hedging strategies, simultaneously engaging with China, Russia, India and traditional Western allies.³⁸ This multipolar shift introduces both opportunities and risks for India. While it creates space for India to enhance its profile through diplomatic and economic engagement, it also exposes it to the unpredictability of competing power centers. Theories of regional security complexes, particularly those advanced by Buzan and Wæver³⁹ are instructive in explaining how security dynamics in geographically proximate areas become so interlinked that they cannot be resolved independently. The Persian Gulf forms part of India's broader regional security complex within the Indian Ocean Region, where disruption at a critical node such as the Strait of Hormuz reverberates across the wider maritime architecture. While debates persist about a potential US retrenchment from the Middle East, current geopolitical realities suggest not abandonment but recalibration: Washington appears to be shifting from large-scale military deployments towards offshore balancing, burden-sharing with regional partners, and integrated deterrence frameworks that rely on alliances, technology and selective force projection. In doing so, the United States is likely to favour security arrangements built around strengthened regional partnerships, expanded maritime coalitions, and economic corridors rather than permanent heavy troop presence. Such a transition, if sustained, would not eliminate US influence but could generate a more multipolar Gulf security order, one that demands greater strategic agility from regional stakeholders, including India.⁴⁰

These contemporary challenges are further magnified by the absence of a cohesive and institutionalised maritime security framework in the Gulf region. Unlike parts of the Indo-Pacific where structured alliance systems, particularly the longstanding US-led security architecture provide deterrence guarantees, interoperability mechanisms, and coordinated maritime presence,⁴¹ the Gulf lacks a comparable, consolidated multilateral framework. Security arrangements in West Asia remain fragmented, largely bilateral and heavily dependent on external powers rather than embedded regional institutions. This institutional gap heightens vulnerability to crisis spillovers and complicates coordinated responses to disruptions in critical waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. India's maritime doctrine has acknowledged the Gulf as a zone of primary interest, yet its ability to shape the regional maritime order remains constrained by capacity limitations and political caution.⁴² As a result, India's responses have remained reactive,

focusing on short-term naval deployments and energy diversification, rather than contributing to a long-term security architecture.

Ultimately, the Strait of Hormuz represents a complex theatre of geopolitics where conventional threats co-exist with non-state violence, where shifting alliances challenge traditional diplomacy, and where strategic agency is contested.⁴³ For India, these challenges require not only military preparedness and diplomatic agility but also a deeper understanding of the underlying structural transformations shaping the region's maritime future.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AND POLICY RESPONSES

India's strategic and policy responses to the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Strait of Hormuz reflect pragmatic diplomacy and the operational application of its maritime doctrine through sea-lane protection, forward deployment and enhanced surveillance. As a state heavily reliant on secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs), particularly for energy imports, India has progressively adopted a multi-dimensional approach that integrates military capability, economic realignment and diplomatic engagement.⁴⁴ Within the framework of neoclassical realism, which combines systemic constraints with domestic and perceptual variables, India's policies in this region reflect both structural imperatives such as global energy markets and regional rivalries and state-led strategic agency aimed at safeguarding national interests.

From a maritime security perspective, India has demonstrated increasing resolve to assert presence in the Western Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁵ The Indian Navy's operational strategy has evolved from a largely defensive posture to an outward-looking, mission-based deployment model. These deployments, such as those undertaken during Operation Sankalp in 2019 and the more recent anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, serve dual purposes: protecting Indian commercial shipping and signalling deterrence. The Indian Navy's capacity to maintain sustained presence across key chokepoints including the Bab el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz has improved due to acquisitions of long-range surveillance platforms like P-8I aircraft and the use of multi-role stealth frigates.⁴⁶ This strategic signalling is consistent with the concept of maritime deterrence through 'fleet-in-being', where visible and capable naval forces act as a stabilising factor without necessarily engaging in kinetic conflict.

On the economic front, India has actively pursued energy diversification to reduce over-dependence on Gulf suppliers transiting through the Strait of Hormuz.⁴⁷ Following disruptions caused by US sanctions on Iranian oil

and Houthi threats to maritime shipping, India has broadened its energy sourcing to include suppliers from the United States, Russia, Latin America and Africa. However, logistical constraints and competitive pricing still render West Asia indispensable.⁴⁸ Therefore, India's strategy has shifted from complete dependence avoidance to risk mitigation through diversification and strategic reserves. The development of strategic petroleum reserves at sites like Padur and Vishakhapatnam reflects this hedging strategy.⁴⁹ Additionally, India's investment in liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure and long-term contracts with Qatar signify a calibrated shift towards energy resilience.

India's diplomatic engagement has been particularly nuanced. Maintaining cordial relations with all Gulf states including Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar, India has avoided entanglement in regional rivalries. This diplomatic balancing act reflects a hedging strategy rooted in the principles of strategic autonomy. Unlike Cold War-era alignments, India's current foreign policy posture embraces flexible coalitions,⁵⁰ as evidenced in its engagement with both the Iran-led Chabahar Port project and the Israel–UAE–US trilateral platforms. This pluralistic engagement aligns with the principles of complex interdependence theory, where states seek cooperation across multiple issue areas without zero-sum outcomes.

An emblematic initiative of India's multi-vector approach is its role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects India with Central Asia and Europe via Iran, bypassing the congested and vulnerable Strait of Hormuz.⁵¹ While the project has faced delays, India's continued commitment to INSTC indicates a desire to create alternate connectivity routes that reduce strategic bottlenecks. The INSTC also complements India's involvement in the Chabahar Port, which serves both economic and strategic functions by offering sea access to Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. This dual engagement with Iran through Chabahar and with Arab states through deepened bilateral and multilateral forums demonstrates India's calibrated geopolitical balancing act.

Another notable diplomatic innovation is India's participation in the I2U2 grouping, alongside Israel, the UAE and the US. Though originally conceived to address food security and infrastructure development, the initiative has latent maritime and energy security dimensions. It strengthens India's profile as a cooperative actor in West Asia, while facilitating access to advanced technology, investment capital and strategic dialogues. I2U2's potential to evolve into a broader Indo-Abrahamic corridor reflects India's embrace of minilateralism⁵² and reflects a broader trend in global diplomacy

where small, purpose-driven coalitions pursue targeted objectives outside traditional multilateral frameworks. Initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) illustrate this logic: beyond energy security, IMEEC seeks to enhance digital and trade connectivity, shorten transit distances to Europe, reduce exposure to disruptions such as those affecting the Suez Canal route, and create diversified infrastructure pathways. Strategically, it also introduces an alternative to underutilised continental corridors linking Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Türkiye, while fostering an interdependent, interest-based connectivity architecture that carries implicit security dividends alongside economic integration.

The strategic rationale behind such engagements also draws from the regional security complex theory, which argues that the security of geographically proximate states becomes deeply interlinked due to historical, economic and political ties. The Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea form an integrated security complex in which developments in one zone invariably affect the other.⁵³ Recognising this, India has placed renewed emphasis on institutional mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and maritime white shipping agreements to enhance regional maritime domain awareness. Furthermore, the establishment of the Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR) near New Delhi positions India as a hub for maritime security cooperation and real-time information sharing among friendly navies.

India's evolving maritime doctrine, encapsulated in its 2015 *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, identifies the Persian Gulf and adjacent waters as a primary area of interest. This doctrinal shift is significant, moving away from a purely continental security outlook towards one that views maritime security as central to national prosperity and power projection. From a constructivist lens, this also marks a shift in India's strategic identity—from a reactive continental power to a confident maritime actor shaping regional norms and practices.

However, India's ability to influence outcomes in the Strait of Hormuz is constrained by structural and strategic limitations. Unlike the United States, India does not maintain permanent forward-deployed forces or treaty-based basing rights in the Gulf,⁵⁴ reflecting both resource limitations and a longstanding preference for strategic autonomy over formal alliance commitments. Additionally, the Gulf's dense security environment marked by entrenched US presence and overlapping regional rivalries limits the scope for unilateral power projection without risking escalation or diplomatic friction. In response, India has pursued logistics agreements with France,

Oman and the US, enabling access to facilities such as Duqm and Diego Garcia to extend operational reach without permanent basing.⁵⁵ These flexible arrangements align with an Indo-Pacific posture that recognises the strategic continuum linking East Africa, West Asia and South Asia. Complementing this approach, India's naval exercises with Gulf partners and Western allies enhance interoperability and crisis coordination while avoiding binding security entanglements.

India's strategic and policy responses, thus, represent a pragmatic blend of naval activism, energy hedging and diplomatic pluralism. As geopolitical flux intensifies across the Persian Gulf, India's carefully constructed toolkit of responses reflects both adaptation to external pressures and a maturing strategic vision rooted in autonomy, connectivity and maritime assertiveness.

RECALIBRATING INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY: POLICY IMPERATIVES IN A CHANGING ORDER

India's maritime strategy in relation to the Strait of Hormuz and the broader Western Indian Ocean Region has grown more sophisticated in recent years, yet significant gaps remain that limit its capacity to proactively shape regional security dynamics. While India has demonstrated commendable intent through initiatives like INSTC, energy route diversification, and the expansion of naval deployments, it continues to face structural and strategic limitations that demand a more coherent, integrated maritime policy. The rapidly changing geopolitical order in the Gulf, marked by increased militarisation, great power contestation, and the proliferation of asymmetric maritime threats, necessitates a recalibration of India's maritime posture, moving beyond ad hoc responses to sustained strategic engagement.

One of the most persistent limitations in India's current approach is the absence of permanent forward-operating capabilities in the Gulf region. However, this reflects strategic choice as much as constraint. India has not actively pursued a formal naval base in the Gulf because permanent basing would entail treaty commitments, political entanglements and exposure to intra-regional rivalries, particularly the enduring Iran–Arab and intra-Arab fault lines. Such a posture would undermine India's carefully maintained strategic autonomy and its balanced relations with both Iran and the Gulf monarchies.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Gulf security architecture continues to operate under substantial American military predominance; India has therefore adopted a strategy of access without alignment, leveraging logistics agreements and port access (e.g., Duqm) rather than seeking sovereign basing rights.

At present, India neither possesses the surplus expeditionary capacity nor the political mandate to assume a hegemonic security role in the Gulf. Filling a potential vacuum created by a significantly isolationist United States would require sustained force projection, intelligence integration, alliance structures and fiscal commitments that exceed India's current strategic appetite. In such a scenario, the more probable outcome would be a multipolar security order shaped by regional powers and external actors such as China, rather than unilateral Indian leadership.

India's military involvement in the region would likely be limited to narrowly defined contingencies: protection of sea lines of communication, evacuation of citizens, counter-piracy operations, or safeguarding critical energy flows under multilateral mandates. Direct participation in regional conflicts whether Iran–Arab or intra-Arab remains strategically undesirable due to escalation risks, diaspora exposure and economic vulnerability. Over the next two decades, India's options will likely center on calibrated presence, diversified partnerships, maritime domain awareness and infrastructure connectivity initiatives rather than territorial basing or security dominance. In essence, India is positioning itself as a stabilising stakeholder, not a replacement hegemon.

Unlike the US or France, India does not maintain a permanent naval base near the Strait of Hormuz, a limitation that reflects strategic choice as much as capacity. A formal basing or defence pact with a Gulf state such as the UAE or Oman could disrupt India's balanced regional posture, provoke counter-moves from China and Pakistan (including potential expansion of Gwadar's role), and complicate ties with Iran. However, advances in long-range surveillance, networked maritime awareness, aerial refuelling and carrier-based operations allow India to project power from home bases. Thus, India's role as a net security provider is more likely to rest on flexible partnerships and rapid deployment capability than on permanent basing commitments.

Additionally, India's maritime doctrinal evolution has yet to fully integrate hybrid and non-traditional threats that now define security risks in chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz. The Houthi attacks, drone warfare, cyber threats to port infrastructure, and environmental risks from potential tanker sabotage demand an expanded threat perception. The current strategy remains overly focused on conventional naval power without sufficient integration of cyber capabilities, space-based surveillance and unmanned maritime systems.⁵⁷ India's maritime strategy must internalise cross-domain vulnerabilities, recognising that future crises in the Strait of Hormuz may

manifest not only through kinetic blockades but via GPS spoofing, cyber disruption of port infrastructure, electronic warfare, or asymmetric drone and missile attacks. As a structural chokepoint, the Strait represents both vulnerability and leverage: while its closure would disrupt all Gulf-dependent economies, littoral states particularly Iran retain geographic proximity and residual access to surrounding waters, complicating external intervention. In this context, it is neither realistic nor strategically prudent to assume that the Indian Navy could unilaterally guarantee the Strait's openness against determined opposition; sustained access would require multilateral coordination and alignment with existing security stakeholders.

India's comparative advantage lies less in coercive capacity than in diplomatic capital. Its balanced engagement with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel provides credibility across rival camps. Rather than pursuing unilateral enforcement roles, India could leverage this goodwill to promote structured maritime dialogue potentially through an expanded Indian Ocean framework or a dedicated Gulf maritime consultative mechanism. By encouraging transparency, confidence-building measures, and norms around freedom of navigation and infrastructure protection, India can transition from a reactive stakeholder to a constructive norm-shaper without overextending militarily in a highly contested theatre.

Thus, India's naval modernisation and operational reach have improved, but resource constraints, bureaucratic inertia and lack of integrated civil-military maritime planning persist. A critical imperative is the establishment of a National Maritime Commission to coordinate efforts between the navy, shipping industry, external affairs, energy ministries and intelligence agencies. Maritime strategy must cease to be treated as a military doctrine alone and be reframed as an instrument of national policy that touches trade, diplomacy, environmental protection and technological innovation. Therefore, India is well-positioned geographically, diplomatically and historically to play a stabilising role in the Strait of Hormuz and adjacent maritime zones. However, it must shed outdated assumptions, embrace multidomain readiness, and assertively pursue regional leadership. The changing maritime order will not wait for policy incrementalism; it demands bold recalibration rooted in Indian interests and regional responsibility.

NOTES

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