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Chokepoints Under Pressure: How Geopolitical Hotspots Are Redefining Global Maritime Trade in 2025

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Introduction

Maritime transport remains the backbone of international trade, with over 80% of global merchandise by volume carried by sea[2]. The efficiency and security of maritime routes are thus fundamental to the stability of the global economy.

Maritime chokepoints are narrow, strategically vital sea passages through which a significant share of global trade must transit. Maritime chokepoints are not just strategically sensitive: they are economically indispensable. Approximately 38% of global trade transits the Strait of Malacca, with another 38% passing through the Taiwan and Luzon region. The Strait of Hormuz accounts for about 19% of global trade flows, while the Suez Canal and Red Sea together facilitate around 15%. The Panama Canal manages roughly 5% of worldwide trade[3].

Source: "Risks and Resilience in Global Trade: Key Trends in 2023-2024", author's elaboration based on IMF Portwatch (data extracted on 10 September 2024) and UNCTAD

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[2] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Maritime Transport 2024*, 2024, https://unctad.org/meeting/launch-review-maritime-transport-2024.

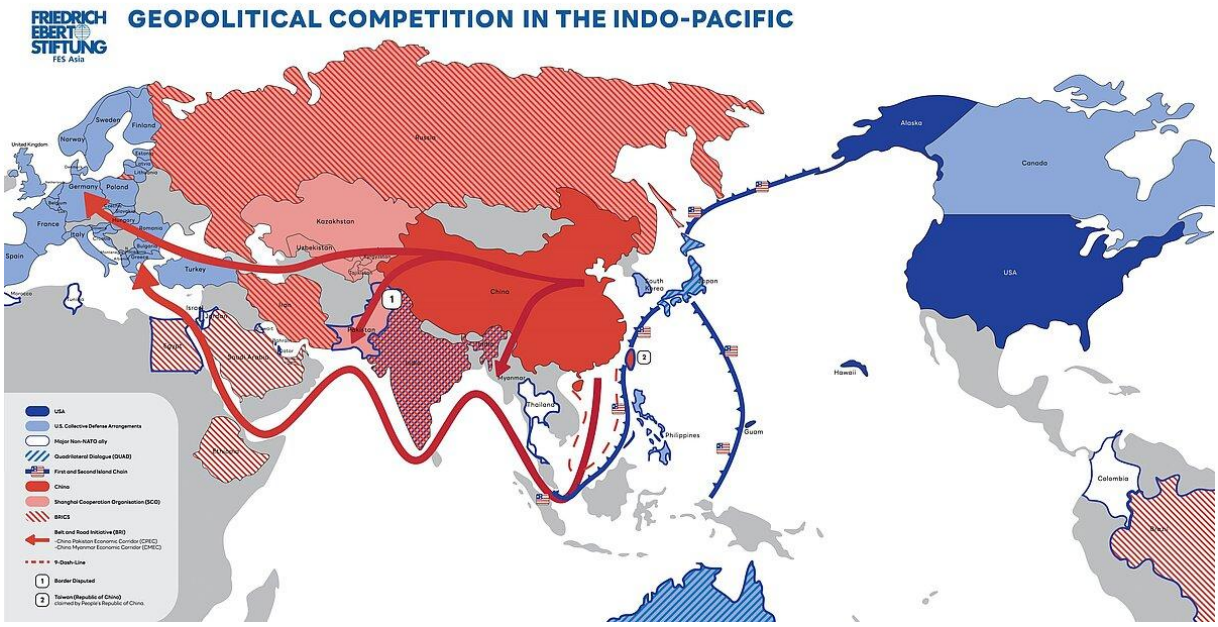
[3] OECD, *Risks and Resilience in Global Trade: Key Trends in 2023-2024*, 2024, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1c66c439-en.

Their significance extends beyond logistics, deeply influencing global supply chains, energy security, and economic stability. A key challenge is that these chokepoints are often located in or near regions with entrenched or rising geopolitical tensions[4]. This not only makes them vulnerable to local instability but also turns them into focal points for international rivalry, as competition for control can intensify existing disputes and further destabilize surrounding areas. In recent years, a growing series of disruptions has highlighted the vulnerability of these vital nodes in the international trading system. These incidents are not isolated anomalies; they reflect a broader pattern of stress affecting the arteries of world trade.

In 2025, the convergence of geopolitical tensions, climate-induced disruptions, and evolving trade realignments is redefining the landscape of global maritime trade. This commentary examines the strategic vulnerabilities of maritime chokepoints, assesses the consequences of recent disruptions, and offers evidence-based recommendations to enhance the resilience of international shipping routes in an increasingly volatile world.

Persistent and Emerging Vulnerabilities

The vulnerability of maritime chokepoints is not a recent phenomenon. These narrow passages have historically served as both lifelines for global trade and sites of geopolitical tension. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, for instance, is regularly disrupted by Yemen's civil war and Houthi missile attacks, while the Strait of Hormuz faces persistent threats from Iran-West tensions. In Asia, the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait are focal points of U.S.-China rivalry.



Source: Map of the geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific (2024), FES Asia Editorial

The Suez Canal, exposed during the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the Arab-Israeli wars, remains highly sensitive. In 2021, the grounding of the container ship Ever Given blocked the canal for

[4] Georgios Smailis, 'The Geopolitics of Global Maritime Energy Transportation: Chokepoints, Markets, Risks and Security' (Master's Thesis, 2025), https://dione.lib.unipi.gr/xmlui/handle/unipi/17758.

six days, causing delays for over 400 ships and billions of dollars in shipping delays[5]. This incident, while not geopolitical in nature, demonstrated how even non-political accidents can halt global supply chains and underscore the strategic fragility of these critical arteries.

Yet the threats to theses maritime arteries have evolved, as modern threats to maritime chokepoints have grown more complex and severe. Asymmetric risks, such as persistent piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and Southeast Asia, drone and missile attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, and escalating cyberattacks targeting port infrastructure, have heightened their vulnerability[6]. In 2025, these dangers intersect with ongoing armed conflicts, climate disruptions, shifting trade routes, and intensifying great power rivalries. This convergence erodes the predictability of maritime trade and undermines its role as a stable pillar of the global economy.

Chokepoints have thus become active arenas of geopolitical contestation and crisis, making it essential to understand and address their layered vulnerabilities to safeguard future global commerce.

Economic, Environmental, and Security Impacts

Disruptions at major maritime chokepoints carry significant economic and environmental ramifications that reach far beyond mere shipping delays.

The Red Sea Crisis exemplifies the profound impact such events can have on global trade, highlighting how a single chokepoint's instability can trigger cascading effects on costs, supply chains, and environmental objectives. On November 2023, in response to the invasion of the Gaza Strip, Iran-backed Houthi forces began attacking shipping vessels affiliated with Israel passing through the Red Sea. In one year, nearly 200 vessels were compelled to bypass the Suez Canal, sharply reducing oil transit and interrupting trade worth nearly $1 trillion[7]. With vessels forced to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope instead of transiting the Suez Canal, each journey is extended by up to two weeks, incurring additional costs of about $400,000 per large container ship due to higher fuel consumption[8].

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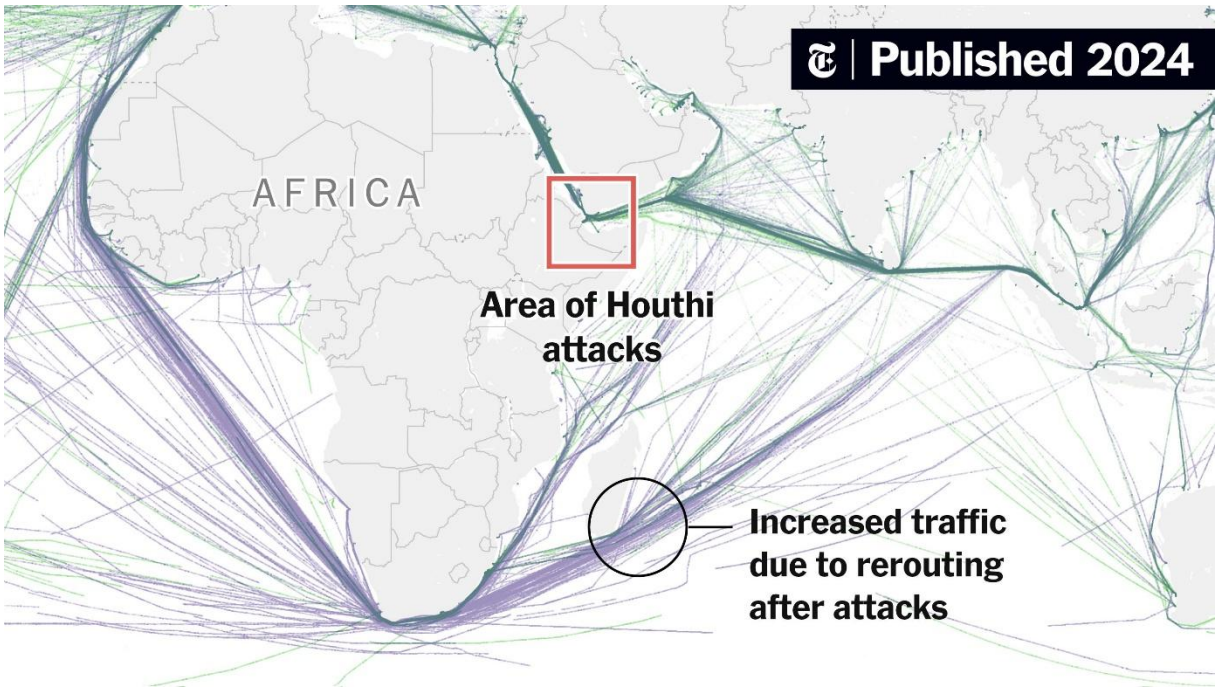
[5] Irfan Ahmed Khan and Syed Rahman, 'Review and Analysis of Blockage of Suez Canal Region Due to Giant Container Ship', *Marine Technology Society Journal* 55, no. 5 (1 September 2021): 39–43, https://doi.org/10.4031/MTSJ.55.5.5

[6] Demetrios N. Tsailas, 'Risks and Threats in the 21st Century Maritime Security', *Security Science Journal* 6, no. 1 (12 May 2025): 106–44.

[7] Ashraf Mohamed Kotait and Ahmed Ismail, 'Geopolitical Threats in the Red Sea: The Future of the Suez Canal amid Regional and International Challenges *30*, 30 المجلة العلمية للدراسات التجارية والبيئية, April 2025, https://dx.doi.org/10.21608/jces.2025.435103.

[8] Tim Jay, 'Global Shipping Faces Turbulence: Chokepoint Disruptions Threaten Trade and Supply Chains', *Global Trade Magazine* (blog), 23 October 2024, https://www.globaltrademag.com/global-shipping-faces-turbulence-chokepoint-disruptions-threaten-trade-and-supply-chains/.

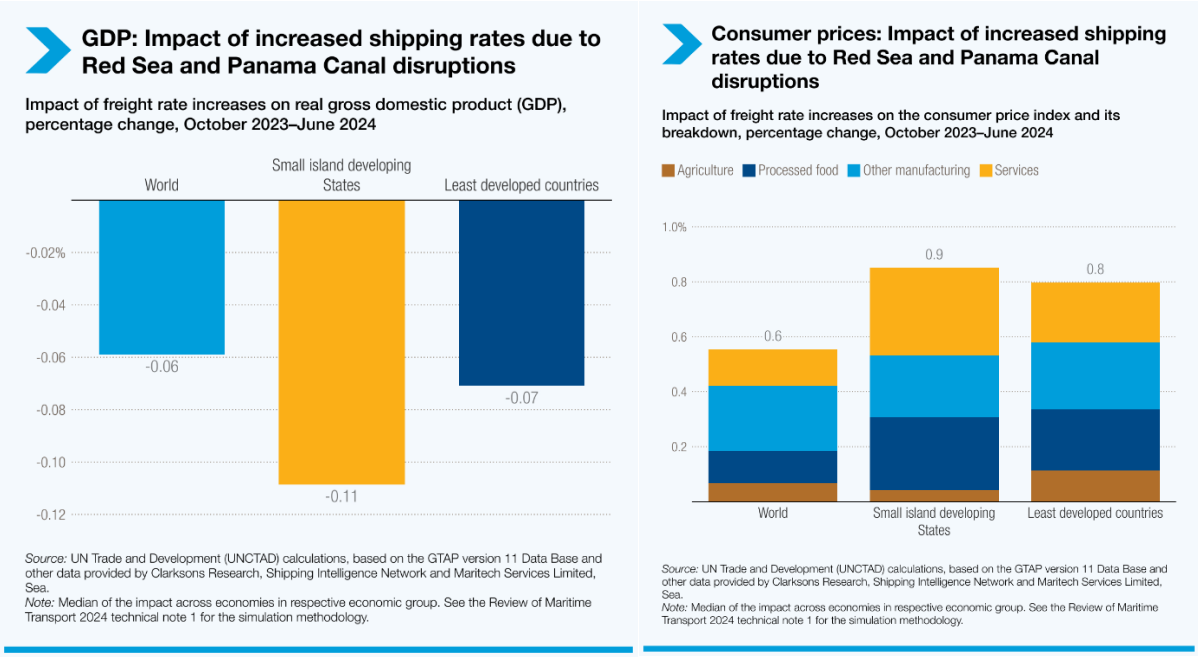


Source: "How Houthi Attacks Have Upended Global Shipping" (2024), New York Times

Furthermore, these longer routes lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions, further complicating efforts to meet IMO decarbonization targets[9]. Additionally, these elevated shipping costs are expected to push global consumer prices up by 0.6% by 2025, with even greater inflationary effects in more vulnerable economies[10].

Beyond the Red Sea crisis, disruptions at maritime chokepoints generally have especially severe consequences for developing economies. This is particularly true for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Fiji and the Maldives, as well as Least Developed Countries (LDCs) like Mozambique and Bangladesh. Limited fiscal capacity, high import dependency and restricted ability to absorb external shocks leave them exposed to rising insurance premiums and transport costs, which drive up inflation, and even shortages of essential goods. These inflationary pressures cascade across sectors including transport, agriculture, and manufacturing, undermining economic resilience even in advanced economies.

[9] MEPC, RESOLUTION. "2023 IMO strategy on reduction of GHG emissions from ships." (2023).
[10] *Review of Maritime Transport 2024*.



Source: Review of Maritime Transport 2024, UNCTAD

UNCTAD notes that such disruptions are aggravating the global cost of living and eroding supply chain predictability.

This emerging climate-security-trade nexus illustrates how chokepoint instability now cuts across multiple global policy domains and sets the stage for a more volatile geopolitical environment.

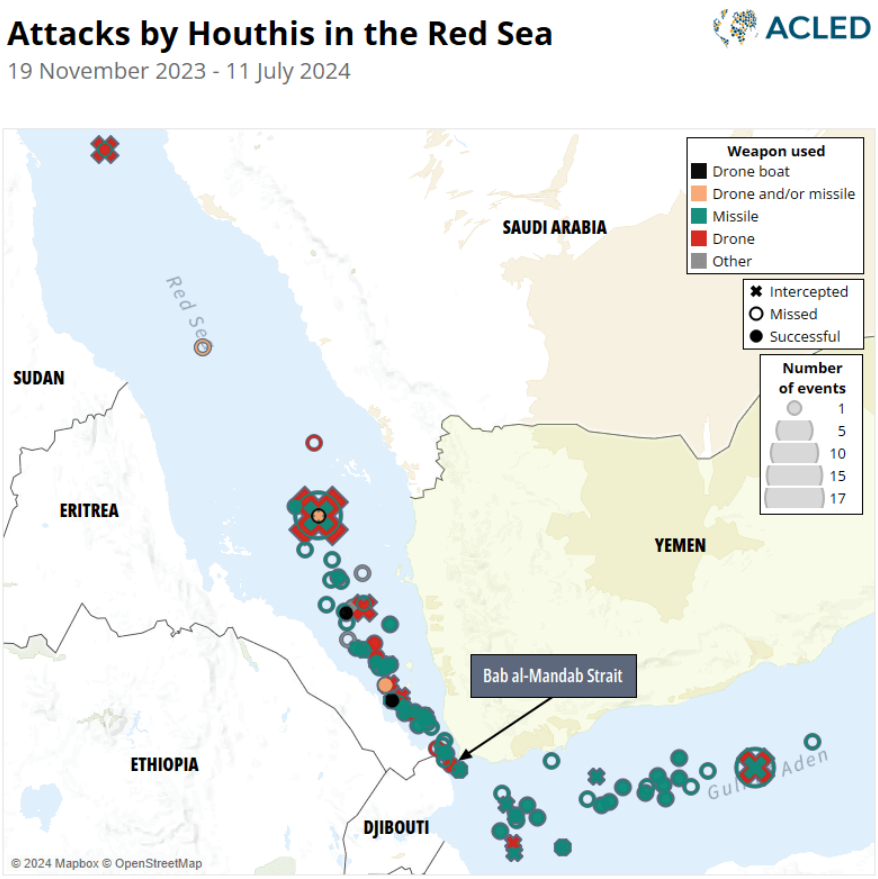
Evolving Threats and the Transformation of Maritime Security

Political decisions and the proliferation of asymmetric threats are increasingly reshaping the global maritime security environment, amplifying economic and environmental vulnerabilities. The June 2025 vote by Iran's parliament to close the Strait of Hormuz vividly demonstrates how state actions in critical corridors can swiftly destabilize global shipping: insurance premiums soared and oil tankers were compelled to reroute, disrupting energy flows and market stability[11].

Simultaneously, the maritime domain faces a surge in asymmetric threats, ranging from unpredictable drone strikes and naval mines to missile attacks at chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz[12].

[11] Kate Lamb and Dan Sabbagh, 'The Strait of Hormuz: How Could Iran Close It and Why Does It Matter to Global Trade?', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2025, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/23/what-is-the-strait-of-hormuz-iran-threat-close-global-trade-oil-shipping.

[12] Smailis, 'The Geopolitics of Global Maritime Energy Transportation'.



Source: ACLED

These challenges, combined with deliberate political maneuvers, are driving up operational uncertainty and costs, transforming maritime security from a strategic issue into a persistent structural challenge. The proliferation of such threats has necessitated expanded convoy escorts, deterrence patrols, and maritime surveillance stretching naval capacity, as exemplified by the U.S.-led *Operation Prosperity Guardian*[13]. However, experts emphasize that enduring security requires more than military deployments; it demands robust intelligence-sharing, early-warning systems, and significant investment in maritime infrastructure and the security capabilities of vulnerable littoral states.

These overt security pressures are compounded by less visible but equally disruptive risks, notably cyberattacks and infrastructure fragility. As the maritime sector becomes increasingly digitized, threats such as GPS spoofing, ransomware targeting port terminals and disruptions to logistics systems represent growing dangers to the continuity of global trade[14]. At the same time, many infrastructures are aging and therefore particularly vulnerable, as demonstrated by the

[13] Waqas Abdullah, Muhammad Ahmad, and Ghilman Fatima Awan, 'The Shifting Dynamics of Maritime Security in The Red Sea: Strategic Interests of Gulf States and External Powers', *Journal of Media Horizons* 6, no. 3 (4 July 2025): 205–14.

[14] Rachmad Andri Atmoko et al., 'Cybersecurity in Digital Maritime Infrastructure', in *Maritime Infrastructure for Energy Management and Emission Reduction Using Digital Transformation*, ed. Mahmoud Elsisi, Noorman Rinanto, and Chun-Lien Su (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2025), 127–83, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-96-4438-4_6

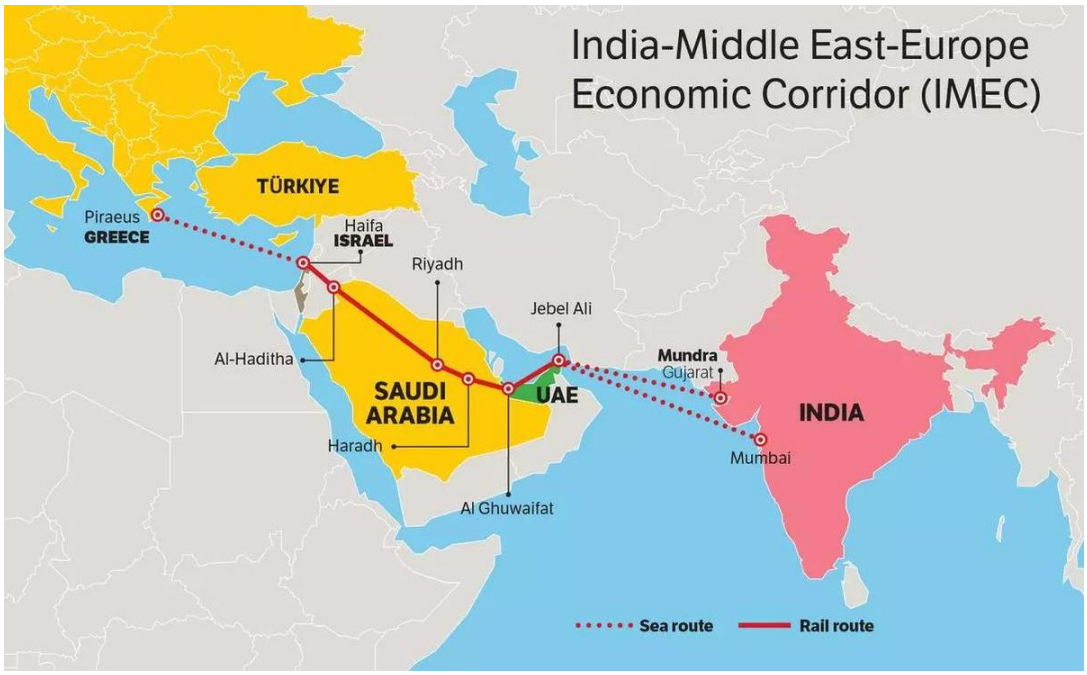
Panama Canal drought[15] and the collapse of the Baltimore Bridge in 2024[16], which triggered cascading delays in the supply chain.

Collectively, these visible and invisible threats underscore the multidimensional vulnerability of chokepoints, where military strain, digital disruption, and infrastructural fragility converge to redefine the risks facing global maritime trade.

Strategic Fragmentation of Global Trade

The intensification of chokepoint vulnerabilities is catalyzing a fundamental reconfiguration of the global trade landscape. Escalating risks have compelled both governments and private sector actors to diversify transport corridors and reduce dependence on traditional maritime routes.

Prominent initiatives such as the India – Middle East - Europe Corridor (IMEC) and the I2U2 partnership (India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States) exemplify this strategic pivot, fostering alternative trade geographies through expanded overland infrastructure, pipeline networks, and eastern maritime routes[17].



Source: Maritime Education

[15] Tamari Poladashvili and Iakob Makharadze, 'The Impact Of The Panama Canal Disruptions On International Trade', *Innovative Economics and Management* 11, no. 3 (23 December 2024): 120–38, https://doi.org/10.46361/2449-2604.11.3.2024.120-138.

[16] Marco A. Lara Gracia, 'Supply Chain Disruption After Collapse of Bridge at the Port of Baltimore', in *2024 9th International Engineering, Sciences and Technology Conference (IESTEC)*, 2024, 553–60, https://doi.org/10.1109/IESTEC62784.2024.10820307.

[17] Nir Levitan, Arie Reich, and Jonathan Rynhold, 'From Conflict to Connectivity: The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor Amidst Geopolitical Turbulence', SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 30 January 2025), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5117805.

While these efforts are designed to enhance resilience, they simultaneously reflect a departure from multilateral reliance on a handful of central maritime arteries. The result is the emergence of a more regionally anchored, strategically hedged global trade architecture, one that prizes redundancy and adaptability over the traditional emphasis on efficiency, marking a pragmatic adaptation to evolving geopolitical and security realities.

Existing Responses and Solutions

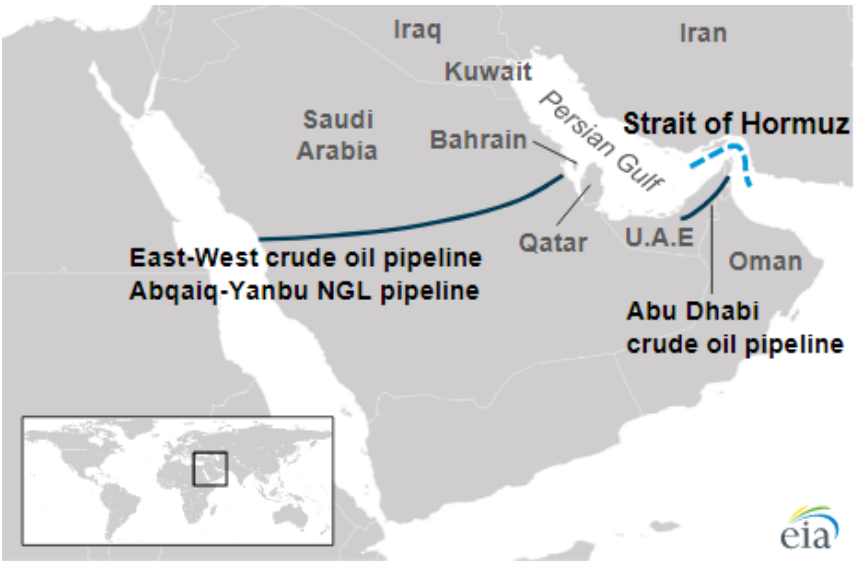
Efforts to address the mounting risks facing global maritime trade have become increasingly multifaceted, reflecting the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary threats.

Maritime security remains a top priority, with coalition patrols, naval escorts, and multilateral operations (such as *Operation Prosperity Guardian*) deployed to deter asymmetric threats and keep commercial flows moving through high-risk corridors like the Red Sea. Regional navies, especially those of Egypt, India, and Saudi Arabia, have stepped up their presence, yet significant gaps persist, particularly for vulnerable flag states and high-value cargo[18].

On the **diplomatic and legal front**, responses have intensified. The IMO has convened targeted dialogues to address state-sponsored disruptions[19], while the United Nations Security Council has held emergency sessions to underscore the urgency of safeguarding sea lanes[20]. However, persistent legal ambiguities regarding maritime blockades, drone warfare, and "gray zone" tactics continue to hinder effective enforcement and the formation of international consensus.

Infrastructure diversification is reshaping regional logistics. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are developing oil export pipelines to Yanbu and Fujairah to bypass traditional chokepoints[21], while large-scale initiatives like the IMEC and China's Belt and Road Initiative, including its "String of Pearls" port network reflect a growing emphasis on logistical redundancy[22]. Despite these advances, alternative routes remain imperfect and often limited in capacity, underscoring the challenge of fully mitigating chokepoint risk.

[18] 'Choke Point of Power: The Red Sea Crisis and Extension of Geopolitical Rivalries', 20 March 2025, https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2025.v2.i2.30292.
[19] SADIK, Giray. "Working Together for Maritime Security".
[20] Pereira, Ana Luiza Neves, & al. "UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC)."
[21] Mathew, A. P. "Strategic Dynamics of Energy Security and Economic Impact: Assessing the Middle East's Role in Global Energy Markets."
[22] Paul, John. "Harbors and Hidden Agendas.", 2023, Simons Center



Source 1: The East-West Oil Pipeline (left) and the Habshan–Fujairah Oil Pipeline of the United Arab Emirates (right), Wikipedia

The maritime sector is also contending with escalating **cyber threats**. The IMO has issued comprehensive guidelines to counter risks such as ransomware and navigation spoofing, and research is increasingly focused on mariner training, firmware integrity, and real-time system monitoring[23]. Nevertheless, rapid digitalization continues to expose ports and vessels to cyber incidents capable of disrupting operations or misdirecting navigation.

Finally, **climate resilience** has become central to maritime security. Organizations like IMO and UNCTAD advocate for decarbonized shipping, port upgrades, and investment in green fuels, recognizing that climate disruptions can be as destabilizing as geopolitical shocks. Yet, enforcement and sector-wide compliance remain significant challenges.

Recommendations and Forward Strategy

Addressing the multidimensional risks confronting maritime chokepoints requires a strategy anchored in six interlinked pillars.

- First, **integrated security architecture** should be advanced through joint naval task forces, formalized information-sharing, and coordinated convoys in high-risk corridors, leveraging technological surveillance and early warning systems to bolster resilience.

- Second, **multilateral diplomacy** must be strengthened, empowering the IMO and reforming treaties to address emerging threats such as drone warfare and maritime blockades.

[23] Aybars Oruc, 'Cyber Security of the Integrated Navigation System (INS)' (Doctoral thesis, NTNU, 2024), https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3148487.

- Third, **supply chain redundancy** is essential, prioritizing investment in overland pipelines, rail corridors, and alternative maritime routes like IMEC to reduce chokepoint dependency.

- Fourth, **cyber and infrastructure resilience** must be enhanced by mandating cyber hygiene standards, supporting port hardening, and incentivizing secure digital adoption.

- Fifth, **integrating climate risk** into operational decisions is vital, accelerating fleet decarbonization and upgrading port infrastructure in vulnerable regions.

- Finally, **targeted support for SIDS and LDCs** is crucial, providing financial safety nets, digital tools, and capacity-building to ensure equitable participation in maritime governance.

Conclusion

Maritime chokepoints have become barometers of systemic fragility, where the pressures of geopolitics, climate disruption, technological vulnerabilities, and global interdependence converge. What were once seen as neutral corridors of commerce are now arenas of contestation and critical tests of collective security and economic resilience.

Ensuring the stability of these vital nodes requires far more than military patrols or emergency rerouting: it demands a comprehensive, coordinated approach that spans security cooperation, diplomatic innovation, infrastructure modernization, and climate adaptation. Only by integrating these dimensions can the international community safeguard the arteries of global trade in 2025 and beyond.