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(IJLGC)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijlgc**THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ AS A CONTESTED MARITIME
CHOKEPOINT: GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY, LEGAL
AMBIGUITY, AND THE FRAGILITY OF GLOBAL
ENERGY SECURITY**Farah Adilla Ab Rahman^{1*}, Siti Melinda Haris², Siti Hajjar Mohd Amin³, Nasyrah Ahmad⁴¹Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Seremban, Malaysia farah855@uitm.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7737-6346>² Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Seremban, Malaysia melinda596@uitm.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0483-9933>³ Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Seremban, Malaysia hajjar@uitm.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4744-6742>

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Abstract:

The Strait of Hormuz constitutes one of the most strategically significant maritime chokepoints in the global energy system, carrying approximately one-fifth of global petroleum consumption through its waters. While existing scholarship has examined its importance largely through energy security, maritime strategy, or geopolitical perspectives, few studies integrate these dimensions within a single analytical framework. This article addresses that gap by conceptualising the Strait as a strategic vulnerability nexus, where geopolitical rivalry, contested maritime legal interpretations, and systemic energy dependence interact to embed instability structurally within the global system. Using a critical interdisciplinary literature review of 52 studies across maritime security, international law, and global energy governance, the analysis identifies three mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities: geopolitical competition heightens disruption risks, legal ambiguity complicates governance and crisis management, and systemic energy dependence amplifies global economic consequences. Evidence from recurring

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maritime incidents, contested legal interpretations, and limited redundancy in energy infrastructure demonstrates that instability in the Strait is not episodic but structurally embedded. The study concludes that sustainable stability requires clearer legal mechanisms, inclusive multilateral cooperation, and reduced reliance on chokepoints through diversification and renewable energy transition. By advancing this integrated perspective, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of chokepoint vulnerability in global energy security.

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Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz represents a critical maritime corridor connecting the Persian Gulf to global markets, playing a central role in international energy trade (Amiri & Zareei, 2020). Geographically, it functions as the only sea passage linking major oil-producing states in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, to global consumers. Approximately one-fifth of global petroleum consumption transits through this narrow waterway, underscoring its indispensable role in sustaining the global energy supply chain (Sahil, 2025). The concentration of such a significant proportion of energy flows within a single chokepoint creates systemic vulnerability, where even minor disruptions can trigger disproportionate economic consequences, including price volatility, supply uncertainty, and broader financial instability.

Existing scholarship has predominantly emphasised the Strait's logistical importance, focusing on energy security, maritime strategy, or geopolitical perspectives. However, fewer studies integrate three critical dimensions—geopolitical rivalry, contested maritime legal interpretations, and structural energy dependence—within a single analytical framework. This article addresses that gap by conceptualising the Strait of Hormuz as a “strategic vulnerability nexus,” where these interrelated factors interact to embed instability structurally within the global system.

The persistence of instability in the Strait is not incidental but reflects deeper contradictions in global governance. Iran's geographic leverage, the sustained presence of external military powers, and divergent interpretations of international maritime law combine to produce

recurring crises. This study therefore argues that instability in the Strait is structurally embedded, arising from the mutually reinforcing interaction of geopolitical competition, legal ambiguity, and systemic energy dependence. By advancing this integrated perspective, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of chokepoint vulnerability in global energy security.

Problem Statement

The persistence of instability in the Strait of Hormuz presents a significant paradox within the contemporary global order. Despite its critical importance to international energy markets and the presence of extensive international oversight, the region remains highly vulnerable to disruption. Recurrent incidents—including maritime attacks, tanker seizures, and explicit threats to close the Strait—continue to expose the fragility of existing governance mechanisms and the limitations of current security arrangements (Lott & Kawagishi, 2022).

Much of the existing literature interprets these disruptions as episodic crises driven by immediate political tensions. However, this perspective is analytically insufficient, as it overlooks the deeper structural dynamics that sustain instability. Specifically, three interrelated dimensions—geopolitical rivalry, contested maritime legal interpretations, and systemic energy dependence—interact to reproduce vulnerability over time. Global reliance on the Strait transforms maritime routes into strategic assets that can be leveraged for coercive diplomacy (Wulandari, 2026). At the same time, divergent legal interpretations weaken governance capacity, while geopolitical competition incentivises confrontation rather than cooperation.

This study therefore argues that instability in the Strait of Hormuz is not incidental but structurally embedded within the intersection of geopolitics, law, and energy dependence. By framing the Strait as a strategic vulnerability nexus, the article moves beyond reactive crisis management to highlight the systemic drivers of instability. This perspective establishes the foundation for analysing how chokepoint fragility is sustained and why effective solutions require multidimensional governance approaches.

Theoretical Framework

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping the Strait of Hormuz, this study adopts two complementary theoretical perspectives: Realism and Energy Security Theory. These frameworks are particularly relevant as they capture both the strategic behaviour of states and the structural vulnerabilities embedded within the global energy system.

Realism

Realism offers a foundational lens for analysing state behaviour within an anarchic international system, where the absence of a central authority compels states to prioritise survival, security, and the maximisation of power. Within this context, the Strait of Hormuz can be conceptualised not merely as a geographical passage but as a strategic asset through which states pursue national interests.

Iran's behaviour in the Strait reflects this realist logic, as its geographic proximity enables it to exert influence over one of the world's most critical energy transit routes. The use of strategic signalling, including threats to disrupt maritime traffic and the deployment of military

capabilities, can be interpreted as rational responses to external pressures, particularly economic sanctions and geopolitical isolation (Divsallar, 2022).

However, a purely realist interpretation also reveals a security dilemma in which actions taken by one state to enhance its security are perceived as threats by others (Jervis, 1978). The presence of external powers, particularly the United States, reinforces this dynamic, contributing to cycles of escalation rather than stability. As such, Realism not only explains state behaviour but also highlights the structural conditions that perpetuate tension within the Strait.

Energy Security Theory

While Realism explains the strategic motivations of states, Energy Security Theory provides insight into the structural importance of the Strait within the global political economy. This perspective emphasises the necessity of stable, affordable, and uninterrupted energy supply for both national and global economic stability.

The concentration of a significant proportion of global oil flows within the Strait of Hormuz creates a condition of systemic vulnerability. Disruptions in this narrow passage have the potential to generate cascading effects across global markets, including price volatility, supply shortages, and broader economic instability (Wulandari, 2026; Kamal & Khalid, 2021).

Importantly, Energy Security Theory also highlights the political dimension of energy flows. Control over critical transit routes transforms energy into a strategic resource that can be leveraged for geopolitical influence. In this sense, the Strait is not merely an economic corridor but a site where energy dependency intersects with power politics, reinforcing its significance within international relations (Yergin, 2011).

Literature Review

Geopolitical Rivalry and Strategic Competition

The Strait of Hormuz is deeply embedded in both regional and global geopolitical dynamics, functioning as a contested space where competing national interests intersect. Iran's geographic proximity provides strategic leverage, enabling it to influence maritime traffic and global energy flows through coercive diplomacy and deterrence strategies (Divsallar, 2022). However, attributing instability solely to Iran oversimplifies the broader geopolitical landscape. The sustained presence of external powers, particularly the United States, contributes to a security dilemma, where defensive measures are perceived as offensive threats, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and escalation (Md Ariffin & Zulkifli, 2023).

The evolving role of China introduces additional complexity. Unlike traditional military approaches, China's engagement is largely economic, reflecting its dependence on uninterrupted energy flows (Sarkhosh pour et al., 2026; Sigit & Meresin, 2021). These multipolar dynamic signals a shift in the balance of power, where the Strait becomes a focal point of both competition and cooperation among diverse actors. Moreover, oil dependence has historically been linked to pathways from energy to war (Colgan, 2013), reinforcing the Strait's role as a geopolitical flashpoint.

Energy Dependency

The Strait of Hormuz occupies a central position in the global energy system, with approximately one-fifth of global petroleum consumption transiting through its waters (Sahil, 2025). This concentration of energy flows creates a structural vulnerability, where disruptions generate cascading effects across global markets, including price volatility, supply shortages, and financial instability (Wulandari, 2026).

Energy dependency transforms the Strait from a logistical corridor into a strategic asset. Control over energy flows enables states to project power beyond their immediate region, reinforcing its geopolitical significance. Although alternative pipelines exist, their limited capacity prevents them from fully substituting the Strait's role (Sahil, 2025). Research on maritime connectivity further demonstrates that disruptions in chokepoints such as Hormuz disproportionately affect global trade reliability (Wang et al., 2024).

Legal Ambiguity

The governance of the Strait is primarily structured around the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which establishes transit passage rights. However, divergent interpretations and Iran's non-ratification of UNCLOS weaken its effectiveness (Lott & Kawagishi, 2022; Churchill & Lowe, 2016).

Contemporary challenges such as hybrid warfare, asymmetric tactics, and the involvement of non-state actors fall outside traditional legal provisions, creating ambiguity in enforcement and accountability (Rafiq et al., 2025). Empirical incidents, including tanker seizures and sabotage operations, illustrate the difficulty of categorising actions within existing legal frameworks, exposing a growing disconnect between legal norms and operational realities. This gap undermines the credibility of international law and reduces its capacity to function as an effective conflict-management mechanism.

Conceptual Integration: Strategic Vulnerability Nexus

Rather than treating these dimensions independently, this study conceptualises the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic vulnerability nexus. Geopolitical rivalry drives strategic competition, energy dependency amplifies the consequences of disruption, and legal ambiguity constrains governance mechanisms. Together, these factors interact in a self-reinforcing cycle, producing instability that is structurally embedded rather than episodic.

This integrated perspective highlights the novelty of the article: instability in the Strait is not simply a product of isolated crises but emerges from the systemic interaction of geopolitics, law, and energy dependence. By framing the Strait as a vulnerability nexus, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of chokepoint fragility in global energy security.

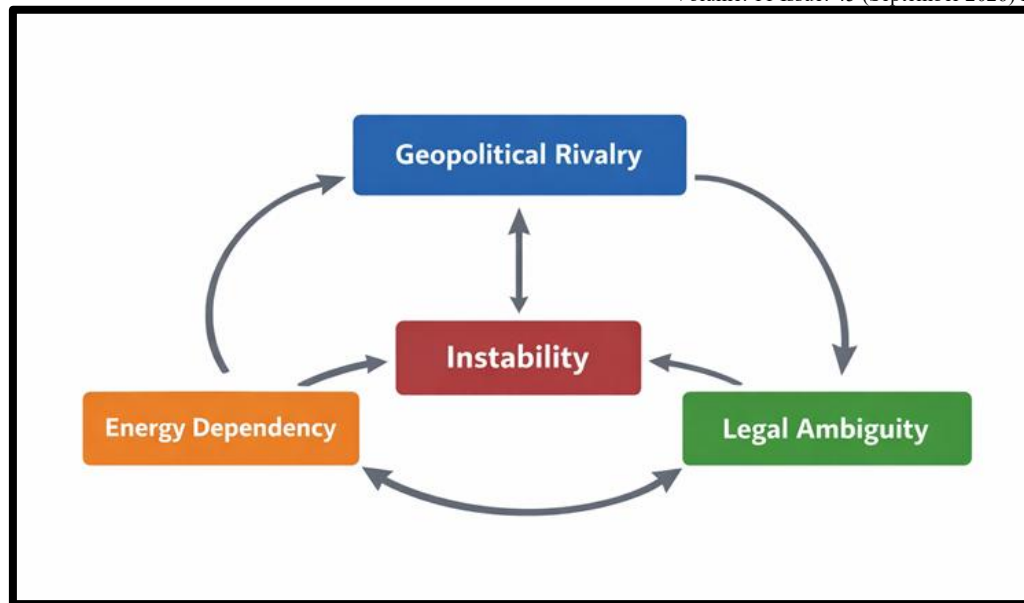


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Instability in the Straits of Hormuz

Sources: (Self-developed Conceptual Framework)

Research Methodology

This study employs a critical interdisciplinary literature review to synthesise scholarship on maritime security, international maritime law, geopolitics, and global energy security. The review method was chosen to integrate diverse perspectives across disciplines and to identify structural linkages between geopolitical rivalry, legal ambiguity, and energy dependence.

The literature review was conducted using academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, covering publications from 2000 to 2026. Keywords such as “Strait of Hormuz,” “energy security,” “maritime law,” “geopolitical rivalry,” and “global trade chokepoints” were applied. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and authoritative policy reports directly addressing the Strait of Hormuz or comparable maritime chokepoints. Exclusion criteria eliminated non-scholarly sources, opinion pieces, and studies lacking empirical or theoretical grounding. In total, 52 studies were reviewed, with thematic coding applied to identify recurring patterns across three dimensions: geopolitical rivalry, legal ambiguity, and energy dependence.

The review method is critical and integrative, rather than purely systematic, allowing for the synthesis of conceptual insights while maintaining analytical rigor. This approach enables the study to highlight structural vulnerabilities that are often overlooked when these dimensions are examined in isolation. By situating the Strait of Hormuz within a broader theoretical framework, the methodology ensures that findings are not limited to episodic crises but instead capture the systemic drivers of instability.

Analysis and Discussion

Energy Dependency as Strategic Leverage

Global reliance on the Strait transforms energy flows into a strategic instrument of power. Disruptions in this narrow corridor have immediate and disproportionate consequences,

including price volatility and supply uncertainty (Sahil, 2025; Wulandari, 2026). Iran's threats to restrict passage highlight how energy dependency can be exploited for coercive diplomacy. Although alternative pipelines exist, their limited capacity underscores the systemic vulnerability of the global energy system (Wang et al., 2024). This dependency amplifies the strategic importance of the Strait, ensuring that any disruption reverberates across international markets and heightens geopolitical tensions.

Legal Ambiguity and Governance Gaps

Recurring incidents such as tanker attacks and sabotage operations expose the limitations of existing legal frameworks. UNCLOS provisions on transit passage remain contested, particularly given Iran's non-ratification and divergent state interpretations (Lott & Kawagishi, 2022). Hybrid threats and asymmetric tactics further complicate enforcement, as actions often fall below the threshold of conventional conflict yet still produce significant geopolitical and economic consequences (Rafiq et al., 2025). This disconnect between legal norms and operational realities weakens governance capacity, leaving the Strait vulnerable to recurring crises without effective mechanisms for accountability or resolution.

Strategic Vulnerability Nexus

Taken together, these dimensions interact to create a self-reinforcing cycle of instability. Geopolitical rivalry drives strategic competition, energy dependency amplifies the consequences of disruption, and legal ambiguity constrains governance mechanisms. Rather than episodic crises, instability in the Strait emerges as a structurally embedded condition within the global system. This nexus perspective highlights the novelty of the article: instability is reproduced through systemic interdependence, making the Strait a persistent focal point of geopolitical risk.

By framing the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic vulnerability nexus, this study advances a more comprehensive understanding of chokepoint fragility in global energy security. It demonstrates that effective solutions must move beyond militarisation and reactive crisis management, instead addressing the deeper structural drivers of instability through cooperative governance, legal adaptation, and diversification of energy routes.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry several important policy implications for both regional and global stakeholders:

Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation

Sustainable stability requires inclusive frameworks that involve both Gulf states and major external powers. Confidence-building measures such as regional maritime security mechanisms, incident-prevention protocols, and information-sharing platforms can reduce mistrust and escalation. Multilateral dialogue should prioritise transparency and crisis communication to prevent misinterpretation of defensive actions as offensive threats (Md Ariffin & Zulkifli, 2023; Colgan, 2013).

Adapt International Legal Frameworks

Existing legal regimes must evolve to address hybrid threats and asymmetric tactics. This includes clearer provisions on transit passage rights, enforcement mechanisms for tanker seizures, and accountability for sabotage operations. Regional agreements could complement UNCLOS by establishing maritime communication hotlines, joint patrol arrangements, and rapid-response legal mechanisms tailored to the Strait's unique challenges (Lott & Kawagishi, 2022; Churchill & Lowe, 2016).

Reduce Chokepoint Dependence

Structural vulnerability can be mitigated by diversifying energy routes and sources. Investment in alternative pipelines (e.g., East-West Saudi pipeline), renewable energy transitions, and strategic petroleum reserves can reduce reliance on the Strait. Regional energy cooperation, including shared storage facilities and diversified supplier networks, would further strengthen resilience against disruption (Wang et al., 2024; Yergin, 2011).

Move beyond militarisation

While military presence may provide short-term deterrence, it often exacerbates the security dilemma. A more comprehensive approach should integrate legal reforms, economic diversification, and political dialogue. Emphasis on cooperative governance rather than unilateral militarisation is essential for long-term stability (Jervis, 1978; Divsallar, 2022).

Conclusion

The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical yet fragile component of the global energy system. Its significance extends beyond geography, encompassing the mutually reinforcing interaction of geopolitical rivalry, legal ambiguity, and systemic energy dependence. This study has demonstrated that instability in the Strait is not episodic but structurally embedded, evidenced by repeated geopolitical crises, recurring maritime incidents, contested legal interpretations, and the absence of viable alternative routes.

The central contribution of this article lies in framing the Strait as a strategic vulnerability nexus, where instability is reproduced through systemic interdependence rather than isolated events. Addressing this condition requires a fundamental shift towards cooperative, adaptive, and multidimensional governance approaches. Strengthening multilateral engagement, reforming legal frameworks to meet contemporary challenges, and reducing reliance on chokepoints through diversification and renewable energy transition are essential steps toward sustainable stability.

Without such efforts, the Strait of Hormuz will continue to function not only as a vital conduit of global trade but also as a recurring source of geopolitical risk. By recognising the structural drivers of instability, policymakers and scholars can move beyond reactive crisis management and develop strategies that address the deeper vulnerabilities embedded within the global energy system.

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