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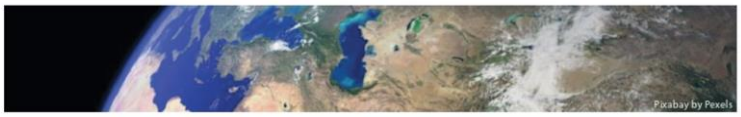

THE MARITIME DIMENSION OF THE US–IRAN CONFLICT

Geopolitics of the Straits, Sea Power, and Strategic Traps in the Persian Gulf

Editorial Staff

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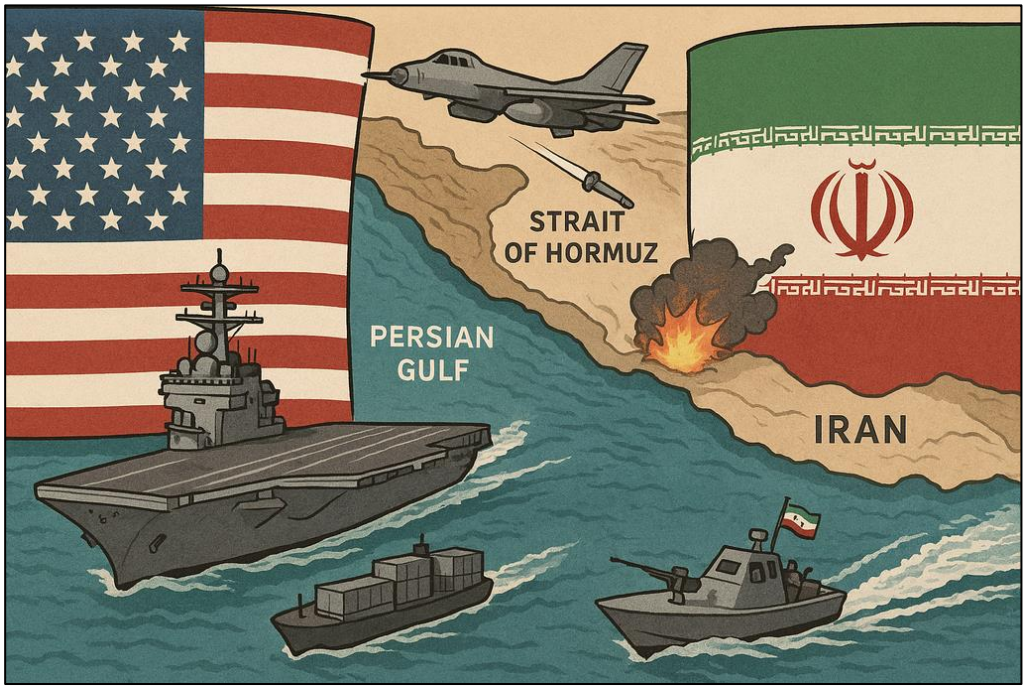

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Analytical Synthesis – March 2026

Introduction

The strategic confrontation between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran represents one of the most critical junctions in contemporary geopolitics. The prevailing narrative tends to frame it in terms of airstrikes, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic negotiations. However, there exists a more concrete dimension of the conflict, less visible in public debate but decisive for the balances of the world economy: the maritime dimension. The Persian Gulf and its natural funnel—the Strait of Hormuz—constitute the pulsing heart of the clash, the place where American technological superiority meets its most acute limits and where Iranian deterrence achieves its maximum effectiveness. Understanding this dimension is not an academic exercise: it is the indispensable prerequisite for anyone seeking to analyze the dynamics of the ongoing crisis and its possible

evolutions with scientific rigor.

The Maritime Theater and the Strategies of the Parties

The theoretical framework of this analysis is rooted in the classical tradition of sea power, systematized by Alfred Thayer Mahan at the end of the 19th century and later re-elaborated by Julian Corbett. According to this doctrine, control of chokepoints—the obligatory bottlenecks of maritime routes—grants the power that dominates them a form of indirect hegemony over the entire world economy. The Strait of Hormuz, with its 21 kilometers of effective navigable width, is the planet's most critical energy chokepoint: approximately 20% of global oil trade and a significant share of liquefied natural gas exports pass through it. Any interruption of traffic, even merely as a credible threat, has immediate effects on worldwide energy prices.

The particular geographical conformation of the Persian Gulf amplifies this structural vulnerability. It is a semi-closed basin, about 1,000 kilometers long and 200 kilometers wide on average, whose northern shores are entirely under Iranian control for a significant stretch. This morphology gives Tehran a position of geographical dominance that no external naval power—no matter how superior in blue-water capabilities—can neutralize without physically entering waters subject to the influence of land-based weapon systems. Corbett's doctrine of sea denial finds its most effective application here: it is not necessary to actively control maritime routes to make their use unsustainable for the adversary.

Against this geographical backdrop, Iran has built one of the world's most sophisticated Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) architectures over the past two decades, specifically calibrated to counter American naval projection. The A2/AD doctrine is articulated on three complementary levels. The first is the missile level: Tehran possesses an arsenal of short- and medium-range anti-ship missiles—including systems from the Noor and Qader families and the more recent hypersonic Fattah—capable of operating from coastal, naval, and air platforms in intense electronic warfare environments. The second level involves asymmetric naval forces: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC Navy) employs a large fleet of fast and light boats that attack using swarming tactics, designed to overwhelm the point defense systems of American naval units through multiple and simultaneous attacks from different directions. The third level is mine warfare: Iran holds one of the Middle East's largest naval mine arsenals, including magnetic, acoustic, and pressure-influence systems, which can be laid at night by small boats, making preventive clearance nearly impossible.

Faced with this denial architecture, American nuclear aircraft carriers—the ultimate symbol of U.S. power projection—reveal a fundamental operational contradiction. Designed to operate in open waters, with ample maneuver space and distance from enemy coasts, these units are at a severe disadvantage in the confined geography of the Persian Gulf, where the average depth of 35 meters makes anti-torpedo maneuvers difficult and where, at any point in the basin, one is already within range of Iranian short-range missiles. Significantly, the two U.S. aircraft carriers deployed in the area operate outside the Gulf, in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, at a safe distance from Iranian coastal batteries. This operational caution, however, significantly reduces the effectiveness of their offensive contribution, with aircraft forced to cover greater distances and reduced weapon loads.

Geopolitical and Strategic Consequences

The geopolitical implications of this operational framework are of first magnitude. Washington finds itself in what strategic literature calls a systemic stalemate: the inability to advance without unsustainable costs, but also the impossibility of retreating without triggering catastrophic geopolitical effects. The U.S. conventional naval superiority—the greatest in history—does not translate into effective coercive power in a theater dominated by Iranian A2/AD, the Gulf's morphology, and the centrality of the Strait of Hormuz. This trap is not contingent but structural: it does not depend on current governments, ongoing negotiations, or individual escalation episodes, but on the geographical configuration and the deterrence architecture built by Tehran over two decades.

On the strategic plane, the game is played primarily on the credibility of respective threats. Iran does not need to actually close the Strait of Hormuz to exercise effective deterrence: the mere ability to threaten it credibly is enough to condition every American operational calculation. Likewise, Iran knows perfectly well that the loss of an American

aircraft carrier—with its crew of over 5,000—would constitute one of the most traumatic events in postwar U.S. military history. Awareness of this vulnerability is likely the most important factor in determining American operational prudence: the simple ability to credibly threaten a carrier is worth as much as actually striking it.

At a broader geopolitical level, the prolongation of the stalemate favors the erosion of the American alliance system in the Gulf. The monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), exposed to the consequences of any escalation, are incentivized to diversify their security relationships, seeking balances with Tehran or strengthening ties with alternative powers—primarily China. Beijing has systematically promoted its diplomatic and economic presence in the region, offering exporting countries the option to settle oil transactions in renminbi through the petro-yuan system, accelerating a global de-dollarization process already underway. The US-Iran conflict is thus not merely a bilateral clash: it is one of the main fronts of the systemic competition between Washington and Beijing for the reordering of the international order.

The case of Kharg Island illustrates the dangers of escalation with clarity. Located 25 kilometers from the Iranian coast in Khuzestan, the island hosts the infrastructure through which about 90% of Iranian crude exports pass. For an American military planner, it represents a high-value strategic target whose neutralization would deprive Tehran of its main source of foreign currency. However, its proximity to the coast exposes any occupying force to constant fire from artillery, rockets, drones, and missiles. Protecting a garrison on the island would require neutralizing Iranian coastal batteries, which in turn would imply amphibious operations on the mainland, leading inexorably inland according to the logic of mission creep—the same mechanism that turned the dispatch of 3,000 Marines to Da Nang in 1965 into a war of half a million men four years later.

Maritime Consequences

The maritime consequences of the US-Iran confrontation span multiple levels and reverberate far beyond the regional perimeter. The first and most immediate is the paralysis of freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait's two traffic lanes are each only two nautical miles wide: a geometric narrowness that turns this passage into a bottleneck without equivalents in the world. No alternative route can absorb the hydrocarbon volumes that normally pass through it: the IPSA pipeline through Saudi Arabia and the ADCOP pipeline in the UAE have a combined capacity of about seven million barrels per day, compared to the 17 million that transit the Strait on average. Any disruption of maritime traffic in this corridor thus translates into immediate energy shocks for the entire global economic system, from Europe to East Asia.

On the naval operations plane, the conflict highlights the structural limits of American power projection doctrine. Nimitz-class and Gerald R. Ford-class carriers—with their air wings of 70-80 aircraft—are designed to dominate the open maritime spaces of the ocean, where distance and water depth allow adequate defensive maneuvers. In the Persian Gulf, all these conditions are inverted: insufficient average depth for anti-torpedo maneuvers, confined spaces that prevent perimeter defense elaboration, and constant proximity to Iranian coastal missile batteries. Positioning U.S. carriers outside the Gulf, in the Arabian Sea, is strategically prudent but operationally penalizing: embarked aircraft must cover additional legs to reach targets, reducing weapon loads and persistence times over objectives. The carrier thus becomes more a tool of psychological deterrence than an effective offensive vector.

The IRGC Navy's naval swarming tactic poses concrete challenges to the point defense systems of U.S. units. These systems—designed to neutralize missiles and aircraft—show significant vulnerabilities against a high number of small, fast, simultaneous targets attacking from multiple directions. Iranian Great Prophet exercises have repeatedly simulated swarming attacks against U.S. naval formations in the Gulf, raising concerns in Washington's strategic circles. This is compounded by the threat of drone swarms—a technology in which Iran has heavily invested over the past decade—capable of saturating the defenses of individual units or entire battle groups at negligible operational costs compared to conventional weapon systems.

Mine warfare represents perhaps the most insidious component of the Iranian naval arsenal, as it produces disproportionate effects relative to its cost and complexity of employment. Historically, even a few mines in congested waters suffice to suspend commercial traffic, given the immediate deterrent effect that mere news of

mined presence exerts on shipping companies and maritime insurers. Dragging operations in an active and contested theater are among the slowest and riskiest in absolute terms, and clearing a strait like Hormuz would take weeks in peacetime conditions, with indefinite timelines under enemy fire. Deploying even a limited number of smart mines could effectively block traffic for days, causing an immediate spike in global energy prices.

The consequences for the petrodollar system are of even greater scope. The mechanism by which Gulf oil exports are denominated in U.S. dollars creates a structural and perennial demand for U.S. currency on international markets, artificially sustaining the dollar's value and providing indirect financing for the federal public debt—which has now reached about 39 trillion dollars. Petrodollars accumulated by exporting countries are recycled into U.S. financial markets through purchases of Treasury bonds, stocks, and corporate bonds. A prolonged blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, reducing petrodollar flows, would place acute stress on this mechanism: GCC nations, deprived of American protection, would be incentivized to accelerate diversification of their reserves and negotiate oil deals in alternative currencies, favoring the ongoing de-dollarization process. Interest rates on U.S. debt would have to rise significantly to attract alternative capital, with potentially destabilizing consequences for federal public finance.

The logistical protection problem of an island garrison like Kharg illustrates, on the purely naval plane, the most concrete dimension of the American dilemma. Maintaining a safe corridor between the island and bases in the Gulf of Oman, through waters already densely mined and dominated by Iranian missile systems, would require continuous escort operations with permanent minesweepers and uninterrupted air cover. Resources of this magnitude could not be employed elsewhere, impoverishing the entire U.S. naval posture in the region. Every tactical gain would transform into an escalating logistical commitment, reproducing on a maritime scale the same dynamic that dragged the United States into the land quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Conclusions

The American strategic trap in the conflict with Iran is first and foremost, and fundamentally, a maritime trap. None of the conventional military options available to Washington can produce a decisive outcome without simultaneously triggering economic and geopolitical consequences of global scope. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz—even as a mere credible threat—conditions the entire American strategy, forcing the Pentagon to calibrate every operational move based on the risk of triggering a response that would damage not only Iran, but the entire network of American alliances and economic interests worldwide. As Paul Kennedy observed in his study on the cycles of hegemony, great powers do not decline because they are militarily defeated, but because the cost of maintaining global commitments eventually exceeds available resources: a phenomenon Kennedy termed imperial overstretch.

The way out of this stalemate requires a structural rethinking of the Persian Gulf's security architecture, articulated on three pillars. The first is the construction of a multilateral regime guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, involving not only Western powers but also the main Asian energy importers—China, India, Japan, South Korea—assigning all interested parties a share of responsibility for the chokepoint's stability. The second is the redefinition of the Gulf Cooperation Council's security system toward regional collective security formulas in which Iran also has a recognized role. The third is the progressive demilitarization of the Strait, to be agreed within a broader negotiating process addressing the nuclear dossier, economic sanctions, and recognition of Tehran's security interests simultaneously. None of these paths is easily implementable. All require from the American side a willingness to acknowledge that the model of unilateral power projection has reached its structural limits. The question is not whether this reorientation must occur, but whether it will be the fruit of a conscious choice or an ungoverned crisis.

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