

Geography as a Weapon: The Hormuz Crisis

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Abstract:

The recent confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States of America in the Middle East highlights a fundamental reality: geography continues to shape strategic outcomes despite rapid advances in military technology. Iran's geography provides significant defensive advantages. Covering a territory nearly as large as Alaska and home to nearly 90 million people, the country presents formidable challenges to any external power contemplating large-scale military operations. Equally important is Iran's extensive coastline along the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Stretching over 1,800 km, it offers numerous locations from which Tehran can deploy missiles, drones, naval mines, submarines, and fast attack craft. Iran's weaponisation of the Strait of Hormuz to disrupt supply chains has ensured that the ongoing conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States is no longer viewed just as a conventional regional crisis.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Hormuz, Geography, International Relationship

1. INTRODUCTION

Geography shapes the geopolitical perspectives of nations and influences how they respond to international developments. Geographical factors shape historical experiences, create trade linkages, and influence cultural and social interactions. It plays a significant role in influencing nations' security perceptions, strategic ambitions and responses to external developments. In military planning, it remains a fundamental point on which planners rely to build operations and to gain strategic advantages. The current crisis in the Middle East has not only brought the importance of geography to the forefront but has also reinforced the strategic significance of geographical features, as instruments of leverage in negotiations.

About Strait of Hormuz

- The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow maritime passage (~20 nautical miles wide) connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, serving as a critical global energy chokepoint.
- A significant share of global oil and gas trade passes through it, making disruptions highly consequential for energy security, global markets, and geopolitical stability.

Maritime Chokepoints & Global Examples

- Strategic straits like Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb, Gibraltar, Bosphorus, and Bering Strait function as critical nodes of global trade and military movement, often becoming sites of geopolitical contestation.
- For instance, Malacca Strait (~82,000 vessels annually) and Bab-el-Mandeb demonstrate how narrow waterways can influence global supply chains and conflict dynamics.

Geography–History Linkages

- Historical events such as the Battle of Tsushima (1905), Umayyad conquest via Gibraltar (711 CE), and control of Bosphorus during Ukraine conflict show geography shaping military and political outcomes.
- Maritime features have historically determined trade dominance, colonial expansion, and strategic advantage, reinforcing geography's role in shaping civilization trajectories.

2. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

Environmental / Geographical Dimension: Physical features like straits, isthmuses, peninsulas, rivers, and plains define resource distribution, connectivity, and ecological systems, shaping human settlement and economic activity patterns.

Economic Dimension: Global trade remains heavily dependent on maritime chokepoints, with disruptions causing energy crises, inflation, and supply chain shocks, as seen in the Hormuz blockade affecting oil flows.

Security / Strategic Dimension: Chokepoints act as strategic vulnerabilities, where states can exercise control, coercion, or denial, making them focal points of naval strategy and geopolitical tensions.

Governance / Political Dimension: Control over strategic geography influences state power, diplomacy, and alliances, with countries investing in naval capabilities and maritime security frameworks to secure trade routes.

Social / Civilizational Dimension: Early civilizations developed along river valleys (Nile, Indus, and Yellow River) and fertile plains, demonstrating geography's role in shaping human settlement, agriculture, and societal evolution.

Human Agency vs Geography

- Human interventions such as Suez Canal and Panama Canal demonstrate the ability to modify geography, reducing distances and enhancing connectivity for trade and military movement.
- However, such interventions remain limited and context-specific, as natural constraints like terrain, climate, and chokepoints continue to impose strategic limitations.

Key Insights for India

- India's energy security is vulnerable due to dependence on West Asian oil passing through Hormuz, necessitating diversification and strategic reserves.
- Strategic focus on Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including Andaman & Nicobar (near Malacca Strait), enhances India's ability to leverage geographical advantage in maritime geopolitics.

Challenges

- Overdependence on critical chokepoints creates systemic vulnerabilities in global trade and energy supply chains.
- Rising geopolitical tensions can lead to weaponisation of geography, disrupting international norms of freedom of navigation.
- Limited alternatives to maritime routes constrain global resilience against such disruptions.

Way Forward

- Diversify energy sources and strengthen strategic petroleum reserves to mitigate risks from chokepoint disruptions.
- Enhance maritime domain awareness, naval capabilities, and international cooperation to secure sea lanes and ensure freedom of navigation.
- Develop alternative trade routes such as International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and multimodal logistics networks to reduce dependency on single chokepoints.

3. THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHY

The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overstated. The critical maritime chokepoint carries around a quarter of the global seaborne oil trade and significant volumes of liquefied natural gas and fertilizers. It also serves as a vital route for the import of food, medicines and technological supplies for the Middle East nations.

Bounded to the north by Iran and to the south by Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the corridor - only about 50 km wide at its entrance and exit and 33 km wide at its narrowest point - connects the Gulf with the Arabian Sea. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) allows countries to exercise control of territorial seas up to 12 nautical miles from their coastline. At the narrowest point, the Strait of Hormuz and its shipping lanes lie entirely within Iran and Oman's territorial waters.

The ongoing crisis in the region has disrupted shipping flows through this narrow passage. The resulting ripple effects go far beyond the region, affecting energy markets, maritime transport and global supply chains. Iran has demonstrated its ability to disrupt shipping through the Strait in a cost-effective manner using drones, fast attack boats, mines and threat of missile attacks. These challenges posed by Iran have in turn raised insurance costs and charter charges, making it financially burdensome for shipping companies to operate here. This has disturbed energy exports of not just Iran but other Gulf States that rely heavily on energy exports for their economies.

Disruptions in the Strait have impacted the economies globally. Rising energy, fertilizer and transportation costs are increasing the cost of living and fueling inflationary pressures disproportionately, affecting the vulnerable sections of society and fragile economies. In Asia, several governments are encouraging work from home and a reduced work week in an effort to conserve fuel. In Africa, countries are urging citizens to reduce electricity consumption while in Europe, states are debating fuel rationing measures. While all nations are redirecting their efforts towards alternative energy sources for their economies, this transition will take time and lead to increased costs. For countries that are still recovering from the economic fallout of the Covid pandemic, the current shock will make recovery increasingly difficult.

Iran is reported to be in negotiations with Oman to charge a transit fee for the use of the Strait. For most nations, this might be an economically viable option in the long run if it translates to the safe passage of ships carrying critical energy resources. There are also reports in the media that Iranian authorities are considering seeking a licensing fee for the use of undersea data cables to generate additional finance. This would not only monopolies the repair and maintenance of the undersea cables in Iran but May also mean that companies would have to comply with Iranian laws.^[iii] While this may generate much needed finances for the Iranian economy, the question facing global policymakers is not whether Iran can impose these levies but if it has the willpower to do so and, if it does, what the appropriate response should be.

The above shows that, Iran has effectively weaponized its geography. Today it occupies a critical chokepoint that controls both energy and data flows, two components that are critical for economic development. By doing so, Iran has transformed what was considered a regional crisis to a global crisis, making all nations stakeholders.

Its tactics have also demonstrated how smaller and less militarily powerful states can effectively deter powerful nations and leverage their geography to gain negotiation advantage. The ongoing crisis in the Middle East is no longer limited to armaments and stockpiles, but it is about oil and possibly data, both of which are closely tied to Iran's unique geographical position.

Iran's Experience Offers Lessons for India's Security Environment. Whether in the Indian Ocean or Along the Himalayan Frontier, Geography Will Continue To Shape Strategic Outcomes

The recent confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States of America in the Middle East highlights a fundamental reality: geography continues to shape strategic outcomes despite rapid advances in military technology. Iran's geography provides significant defensive advantages. Covering a territory nearly as large as Alaska and home to nearly 90 million people, the country presents formidable challenges to any external power contemplating large-scale military operations. Equally important is Iran's extensive coastline along the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Stretching over 1,800 km, it offers numerous locations from which Tehran can deploy missiles, drones, naval mines, submarines, and fast attack craft. At the center of Iran's strategic calculus lies the Strait of Hormuz, arguably the world's most important energy choke point. Its physical characteristics make it particularly vulnerable. At its narrowest point, it spans only a few dozen kilometers; designated shipping lanes are even narrower. Iran controls the northern shoreline and occupies strategically significant islands such as Qeshm, Hormuz, and Abu Musa, giving it effective oversight of maritime traffic. Rather than seeking outright naval dominance against the US navy, Tehran focuses on disruption and uncertainty. The objective is not necessarily to close the Strait of Hormuz entirely but to raise the risks and costs associated with commercial shipping. The recent tensions demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Iranian threats and selective action against maritime traffic contributed to disruptions in shipping patterns and heightened volatility in global energy markets. This strategy has deep historical roots. During the Tanker War of the 1980s, Iran targeted commercial shipping in the Gulf, compelling the US to undertake escort operations and maritime security missions. Although Washington successfully protected shipping and damaged Iranian naval assets during Operation Praying Mantis, the challenge posed by mines and dispersed asymmetric threats persisted. Iran's approach reflects broader changes in contemporary warfare. Increasingly, weaker powers seek leverage through disruption, attrition, and economic pressure rather than decisive military victories. Low-cost drones, missiles, mines, and small maritime platforms can force adversaries to expend far more expensive defensive resources. This creates an unfavorable cost-exchange ratio that can erode the advantages enjoyed by stronger militaries. For India, these developments carry significant implications. India imports approximately 85%–90% of its crude oil requirements, with a substantial share originating from Gulf producers. Much of this energy supply transits through the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption in that region adversely affects fuel prices, inflation, fertilizer production, and overall economic growth. The strategic response must focus on resilience. Strengthening strategic petroleum reserves, accelerating renewable energy adoption, expanding domestic exploration, and diversifying supply chains should be key priorities. Equally important is sustained diplomatic engagement with Iran, Gulf monarchies, and other regional stakeholders to reduce tensions. As competition intensifies across the Indo-Pacific, the Indian navy's role in protecting sea lines of communication will become increasingly important. Enhanced maritime domain awareness, stronger naval capabilities, and closer cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific can help safeguard critical trade routes and energy supplies. Iran's experience also offers lessons for India's security environment. Whether in the Indian Ocean or along the Himalayan frontier, geography will continue to shape strategic outcomes. Investments in drones, missiles, surveillance systems, and indigenous anti-access capabilities need to be increasingly aligned with the evolving character of warfare.

4. THE GEOPOLITICS OF HORMUZ

The renewed confrontation between the United States and Iran has demonstrated that the Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most consequential geopolitical chokepoints. While military escalation has exposed the fragility of recent diplomatic agreements, economic realities and mutual strategic constraints continue to make negotiation more attractive than prolonged conflict, even as both sides seek greater leverage at the bargaining table. For decades, the Strait of Hormuz has represented far more than a narrow maritime passage linking the Persian Gulf to global markets. It is one of the few geographic bottlenecks capable of influencing the international economy within hours. Every confrontation involving the waterway reverberates across energy markets, military planning, and diplomatic calculations far beyond the Middle East.

The latest crisis between Washington and Tehran illustrates this reality with remarkable clarity.

The Memorandum of Understanding reached between President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian initially appeared to reduce the immediate risk of conflict. In exchange for sanctions relief and the removal of a U.S. naval blockade, Iran agreed to facilitate commercial navigation through the Strait of Hormuz while opening discussions with Oman and neighboring Gulf States over the future administration of the waterway.

Yet the agreement contained a critical weakness: Rather than establishing detailed operational rules governing maritime traffic before implementation, the accord deferred those questions until later negotiations. What appeared to be a diplomatic breakthrough instead created competing interpretations of who ultimately controlled navigation through one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

That ambiguity quickly became a source of confrontation.

Geography as Strategic Power: For Tehran, the Strait of Hormuz represents its single greatest source of geopolitical leverage. Control over maritime access provides Iran with influence far exceeding its conventional military strength, allowing it to threaten global energy supplies without necessarily engaging in prolonged warfare.

Escalation through Miscalculation: As Iranian forces attempted to enforce their preferred shipping routes, military exchanges rapidly followed. American strikes against Iranian military infrastructure prompted retaliatory attacks on U.S. facilities across the Gulf, demonstrating how quickly tactical disagreements can evolve into broader regional conflict.

Diplomatic efforts struggled to keep pace: Negotiations intended to stabilize the ceasefire collapsed following attacks on commercial shipping, leading Washington to launch its largest military operation against Iranian targets since the original agreement had been signed. Tehran responded in kind, creating an increasingly dangerous cycle of retaliation and counter-retaliation. President Trump subsequently declared the agreement effectively void during the NATO summit in Ankara, while threatening both renewed naval blockades and significantly expanded military operations should Iranian attacks continue.

Financial markets responded immediately: Brent crude prices climbed sharply as investors once again priced geopolitical risk into global energy supplies, reminding governments that disruptions in Hormuz remain capable of influencing inflation, transportation costs, and economic growth worldwide.

Diplomacy under Pressure: Despite the military escalation, neither side appears eager to pursue an extended conflict. For Washington, domestic political realities impose meaningful constraints. Rising fuel prices would place additional pressure on inflation while creating electoral challenges ahead of congressional elections. At the same time, the conflict has placed increasing strain on American precision-guided missile inventories, forcing difficult decisions regarding military production and overseas commitments.

Iran confronts equally severe limitations: Years of economic sanctions, damaged infrastructure, persistent inflation, and domestic political dissatisfaction leave Tehran with limited capacity to sustain a prolonged confrontation. Although maintaining influence over Hormuz remains central to Iranian strategy, continued warfare risks further weakening an already fragile economy. Consequently, both governments appear to be pursuing a familiar strategy: increasing military pressure to improve negotiating positions while stopping short of actions likely to trigger an uncontrollable regional war.

Israel's Different Calculus: The crisis also reflects differing strategic priorities among America's regional partners. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has consistently opposed agreements that reduce pressure on Tehran, arguing that sustained economic and military coercion offers the best opportunity to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional influence.

President Trump, however, faces a more complicated calculation: Although willing to employ military force when necessary, his administration also has strong incentives to avoid another open-ended Middle Eastern conflict that could undermine economic stability and distract from broader strategic priorities, including competition with China. Those differing objectives do not necessarily weaken the U.S.-Israel partnership, but they illustrate that allies can share long-term goals while disagreeing over the optimal path toward achieving them.

The Economics of Compromise: Ultimately, neither Washington nor Tehran benefits from permanent confrontation. For Iran, broader nuclear concessions could unlock substantial economic rewards through restored oil exports, access to frozen overseas assets, and international investment needed to rebuild critical infrastructure. For the United States, a durable agreement would stabilize energy markets, reduce military commitments in the Gulf, and allow greater attention to strategic competition elsewhere.

The central challenge remains one of trust: Relations between the United States and Iran have been shaped by decades of mutual suspicion, making even limited agreements vulnerable to competing interpretations and political pressures. Every ceasefire becomes an opportunity for tactical advantage; every negotiation carries the risk of renewed confrontation.

The Chokepoint That Shapes the World: The latest crisis demonstrates that geography continues to shape international politics as powerfully as ideology or military capability. The Strait of Hormuz remains the world's most consequential maritime chokepoint precisely because its importance extends beyond the Middle East. A disruption there influences energy prices in Europe, inflation in North America, manufacturing in Asia, and economic confidence across global markets. Military force can temporarily alter the balance of power, but it cannot eliminate the strategic realities imposed by geography. For that reason, diplomacy—however difficult—remains the only durable solution. Both Washington and Tehran possess powerful incentives to return to negotiations, not because mutual trust has emerged, but because neither side can afford the economic, political, or military costs of allowing Hormuz to become a permanently contested battlefield.

Hormuz Is Just the Beginning of A World Held Hostage by Geography

For India, these developments carry significant implications. India imports approximately 85%–90% of its crude oil requirements, with a substantial share originating from Gulf producers. Much of this energy supply transits through the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption in that region adversely affects fuel prices, inflation, fertilizer production, and overall economic growth. The strategic response must focus on resilience. Strengthening strategic petroleum reserves, accelerating renewable energy adoption, expanding domestic exploration, and diversifying supply chains should be key priorities. Equally important is sustained diplomatic engagement with Iran, Gulf monarchies, and other regional stakeholders to reduce tensions. As competition intensifies across the Indo-Pacific, the Indian navy's role in protecting sea lines of communication will become increasingly important. Enhanced maritime domain awareness, stronger naval capabilities, and closer cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific can help safeguard critical trade routes and energy supplies. Iran's experience also offers lessons for India's security environment. Whether in the Indian Ocean or along the Himalayan frontier, geography will continue to shape strategic outcomes. Investments in drones, missiles, surveillance systems, and indigenous anti-access capabilities need to be increasingly aligned with the evolving character of warfare.

5. CONCLUSION

Geography has emerged as a powerful tool for Iran in this conflict, while simultaneously exposing it to vulnerability for its adversaries. The United States in the past has used its military might to re-establish the flow of maritime traffic

through the Strait; however, President Trump's calls to allies and partners to help secure the Strait have generated a muted response. The fear is that even with traffic restored, it will take months for energy prices to normalize and for citizens to see the benefits, leaving them to face prolonged inflationary pressures. The weaponisation of geography is an old technique of warfare; nonetheless, Iran's use of its geography to gain leverage, not just against its immediate adversary but also the global economy, is perhaps the first multidimensional use of this practice. Iran's capacity to sustain prolonged disruption carries the risk of severe retaliation and economic self-damage. Israel and the United States, for their part, cannot fully neutralize the inherent vulnerabilities of global chokepoints. Meanwhile, international mitigation mechanisms cannot indefinitely offset the combined impact of physical damage and logistical disruption. This situation has placed the international system under considerable stress. At present, the status quo in the Strait of Hormuz has been disrupted and remains unclear whether a future ceasefire will restore the previous norm and freedom of navigation. Therefore, countries will now have to plan for diversification of their energy routes and sources, taking into account the changing global dynamics. The Strait of Hormuz crisis reaffirms that while technology enhances human capacity, geography remains a decisive factor in global affairs, necessitating strategies that align national power with geographical realities.

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