



# Problems and Prospects for Naval Escorts in the Strait of Hormuz

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## Problems and Prospects for Naval Escorts in the Strait of Hormuz

*By Nicholas Lim and Andrew Lim Hock Chye*

### SYNOPSIS

*The call for naval escorts in the Strait of Hormuz has not gained traction thus far, in part due to the intense threat environment and the geopolitical situation. It is useful to draw insights from previous naval escort operations in the Gulf of Aden and, more recently, in the Red Sea to better understand the complexities of such operations. Ultimately, a combination of diplomatic engagements and international commitment to rules-based frameworks will be required to keep the strait open.*

### COMMENTARY

Approximately one-fifth of the world's energy passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Due to the ongoing war between the United States/Israel and Iran, this vital commercial route has become an asymmetric kill zone. As a result, maritime insurance premiums have surged, placing severe pressure on the global energy supply chain.

On 14 March, United States President Donald [Trump](#) called on countries to help address the threat. He stated that while Iran's conventional military capability had been destroyed, it could still employ asymmetric assets such as drones, naval mines or close-range missiles. He urged nations, including China, France, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, to send warships to escort merchant vessels and keep the chokepoint open.

### Historical Precedents of Naval Escorts

Naval escort operations (or convoying) in the Persian Gulf are not unprecedented. During the Iran-Iraq "Tanker War", commercial oil tankers faced persistent attacks

from sea mines and missiles. [Operation Earnest Will](#), the US naval operation of 1987 to reflag Kuwaiti tankers, protected them through the contested, high-threat waters. The escorts served various strategic purposes, showing commitment to freedom of navigation and reassuring energy markets.

Despite the importance of the Strait of Hormuz, international responses to the US' call to deploy ships for escort duties have been [lukewarm](#), mainly due to countries' concerns about being drawn into the regional conflict or assuming risks with their military assets. Some countries, such as Australia, have even explicitly stated that they would not send any warships.

To better understand the prospects and challenges of naval escort operations, it is useful to examine past missions in similarly contested, high-threat maritime environments. Valuable strategic insights can be drawn from the multinational counter-piracy escort efforts in the Gulf of Aden conducted since 2009, as well as ongoing operations in the Red Sea, where naval forces have been deployed to protect commercial shipping from asymmetric drone and missile attacks by the Houthis.

### **Counter-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden**

The critical situation in the Gulf of Aden (GoA) caused by the surge in piracy and hijacking incidents led to the adoption of several United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs). Specifically, [UNSCR 1816](#) and [UNSCR 1851](#) authorised action against the pirates and expanded the operational mandate to include land-based counter-piracy missions, respectively.

Even so, due to divergent political alignments, not all countries were willing to join the US-led Combined Task Force [151](#) (specifically formed for the counter-piracy operation) or NATO's [Operation Ocean Shield](#). Countries such as China, India, and Japan chose to deploy warships that operate [independently](#), strictly under their own command and mandate.

### **Issues in Multinational Coalition Operations**

Being part of a multinational coalition signals strategic support. Coalition frameworks also enhance coordination and surveillance coverage along the designated transit corridors. The integration of [maritime patrol aircraft](#), provided by some participating countries, significantly improved maritime domain awareness.

This means that a small number of surface combatants could effectively escort multiple merchant vessels by providing wide-area screening, supplemented by the armed guards aboard the commercial ships, which provided point defence. However, despite this, international participation remained uneven.

A primary issue stems from divergent Rules of Engagement (ROE). Sovereign warships operate under distinct national mandates governing the use of force, which sometimes limit their tactical flexibility and, in turn, their involvement in multinational coalition operations. For instance, some countries cannot respond when a

commercial ship is hijacked because their ROE policy requires specialised military detachments that may not be part of the ship's detachment.

Force [sustainment](#) is another issue, as escort missions require force-generation planning that involves maintenance cycles, crew rotations, and complex logistics support.

### **Operational Risks in a Hyper Militarised Environment**

Following the outbreak of hostilities in Gaza as a result of the Oct 7 attacks by Hamas, the Houthis started a campaign of asymmetric attacks against commercial shipping, notably hijacking the Israeli-owned car carrier [Galaxy Leader](#) in November 2023. The militant group then expanded its target set and by January 2024 had already attacked more than 20 ships with drones and missiles.

This led the UN to explicitly condemn the aggression in [UNSCR 2722](#), demand an immediate cessation of attacks, and affirm the rights of member states to defend their maritime assets. Consequently, the US initiated the formation of an international maritime security force under [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#) (OPG). At the same time, the European Union launched [Operation Aspides](#) (OA), specifically focused on intercepting threats to commercial shipping.

Escort operations in the Red Sea illustrate perfectly how an elevated threat environment severely affected operational commitments from countries. Unlike in the GoA, where the primary threat was pirates boarding ships, the Houthi [attacks](#) involved drones and anti-ship missiles. This threat necessitated the deployment of advanced warships equipped with surveillance sensors to detect both drones and missiles, along with appropriate hard-kill measures, including automated guns and anti-air missiles.

The highly compressed reaction timelines associated with the aerial threats exponentially raised the stakes for escort forces to defend both themselves and the merchant ships. Tactically, this means that a single warship could not escort more than a couple of commercial ships. Consequently, far fewer states contributed naval assets, reflecting a profound reluctance to assume the heightened political and operational risks.

### **Operational Implications in the Strait of Hormuz**

The physical geography of the Strait of Hormuz significantly amplifies operational constraints compared to other theatres. The [channel](#) is constricted, and ships typically have to pass through the designated traffic separation scheme. Small craft operating from the Iranian coastline critically complicates threat identification, as they could transition from benign civilian platforms to surveillance nodes or attack vectors at a moment's notice.

The intensified threat environment in the Hormuz chokepoint today extends beyond aerial threats to include advanced electronic warfare, specifically active jamming and interference with Global Positioning System ([GPS](#)) navigation signals used by ships.

This has resulted in the few ships that continue to transit the Hormuz turning “[dark](#)”, either by switching off their position transponders or deliberately transmitting spoofed location information, to evade being targeted.

When this severe electronic degradation is coupled with the persistent threat of sea mines, a viable escort coalition would require more than just standard frigates. Highly specialised mine countermeasures vessels would need to operate in tandem with the anti-aircraft-capable warships, which would be an immense logistical and operational burden.

Given the additional demands and risks, countries would be even more hesitant to commit resources for a coalition force. Those who decide to send warships would likely prioritise protecting their own flagged vessels over committing to a broader collective security effort, as in the recent case of the [Indian Navy](#).

In terms of international legitimacy, while the UN has condemned the attacks in the Strait of Hormuz via [UNSCR 2817](#) and affirmed the right of states to protect their vessels, participation in a coalition escort operation will be highly politically sensitive. It is questionable whether countries would put their assets under a US-led coalition under current [geopolitical](#) conditions. With the [European](#) community maintaining a vague posture and [Asian](#) nations hesitating to commit naval assets, the collective protection of this vital maritime artery remains in doubt.

## Conclusion

Deploying naval escorts in the Strait of Hormuz may provide short-term reassurance to the shipping and energy markets. Yet they are not a simple or risk-free endeavour. Given the historical precedent, the threat environment, and the realities of coalition politics, any escort operation is a complex military undertaking.

A more practical and sustainable solution is to bring together other key stakeholders, such as international actors and the shipping industry. To re-open the strait and ensure safe passage for ships, we need diplomatic engagement and international commitment to rules-based frameworks and agreements, given the immense impact on world order.

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