

Britain's Role in an Evolving Gulf Security Order: The Strait of Hormuz Crisis, International Law, and Freedom of Navigation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Britain's role in the evolving Gulf security order, focusing on the Strait of Hormuz crisis, international law, and freedom of navigation. It analyses how regional rivalries, maritime insecurity, and disruptions to global trade shape Britain's strategic engagement in the Gulf. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory, maritime security governance, and mid-dle-power strategy, the article evaluates Britain's naval capabilities, diplomatic initiatives, and participation in multinational maritime cooperation. It also examines the legal framework governing transit passage and the limitations imposed by international law on maritime enforcement and the use of force. The analysis argues that although Britain can contribute significantly to protecting commercial shipping and reducing navigational risks, its influence remains constrained by limited military resources, regional political tensions, and the potential for escalation. The article concludes that sustainable maritime security requires a balanced approach combining credible deterrence, consistent application of international law, inclusive diplomacy, and stronger regional cooperation. Britain's long-term contribution should therefore be assessed not only by its immediate crisis response but also by its ability to support a resilient Gulf security order that reduces the likelihood of future maritime crises.

Keywords: Strait of Hormuz; British Foreign Policy; Freedom of Navigation; International Maritime Law; Gulf Security Order

Introduction

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most consequential maritime chokepoints, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the wider Indian Ocean. Its strategic importance is commonly explained through the volume of oil and liquefied natural gas transported through it. Yet Hormuz is more than an energy corridor: it is a place where regional rivalry, naval power, international law, and the security of global commerce intersect. Disruption can affect energy prices, shipping costs, supply chains, and the strategic calculations of states far beyond the Gulf. The strait therefore provides a revealing setting in which to examine not only the vulnerability of global trade, but also the capacity of states to protect shared maritime interests without intensifying the political conflicts that threaten them.

This article focuses on Britain's role in that challenge. The United Kingdom remains an influential external actor in Gulf security through its diplomatic networks, defence partnerships, naval capabilities, and participation in multinational maritime initiatives. Its regional position is supported by longstanding relationships with Gulf governments and a naval support facility in Bahrain, as well as specialist capabilities relevant to maritime surveillance and mine countermeasures. Britain, however, cannot independently determine the regional balance of power or guarantee safe passage through Hormuz. Its forces face competing commitments, its policy is closely connected to cooperation with allies, and its influence depends on the choices of regional states whose security priorities do not always align. Britain's role is consequently a useful case for examining how a state can seek strategic influence through a combination of military capability, diplomatic coordination, and support for international law while remaining unable to control the wider security environment.

The strait's economic significance creates a structural vulnerability. The US Energy Information Administration has identified Hormuz as a major oil transit chokepoint, with roughly one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption passing through it in recent years. The exact volume varies with production, demand, sanctions, and shipping patterns, so quantitative claims must be tied to a specific reporting period. Even without a complete or sustained closure, threats against commercial vessels, seizures, mines, drone attacks, or uncertainty about safe passage can disrupt normal operations. Shipping companies may delay voyages, change routes where feasible, adopt additional security measures, or face higher insurance costs. The economic consequences thus arise not only from physical interruption but also from uncertainty about whether disruption may occur.¹

The security environment surrounding Hormuz is shaped by the interaction of regional and international interests. Iran and the Arab Gulf states hold different perceptions of threats and regional order. The United States retains a major military role, while European states seek to protect navigation and sustain diplomatic influence. Asian economies also have substantial interests in uninterrupted energy flows. These actors may share an interest in keeping commercial shipping safe while disagreeing over sanctions, deterrence, the use of force, and the political causes of a crisis. The result is an environment in which a measure presented by one state as defensive may be interpreted by another as coercive. Maritime security is therefore not simply a technical problem of escorting ships; it is a political problem involving competing interpretations, credibility, and the risk of escalation. Developments in 2026 have brought these tensions into sharper focus. In April, the United Kingdom and France convened an international summit on the Strait of Hormuz. Their joint statement emphasised freedom of navigation, international law, global economic stability, and the need for a diplomatic settlement, while describing plans for a strictly defensive multinational mission to protect merchant vessels and support mine clearance when conditions permitted (UK Government, 2026a). In May, the two governments advanced discussions on a proposed multinational mission focused on civilian shipping, mine clearance, and operations conducted in accordance with international law and national procedures (UK Government, 2026b). Britain also announced intended contributions involving mine-hunting equipment, counter-drone systems, aircraft, and a warship (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026c).

¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491252>.

These official announcements demonstrate the diplomatic and operational direction of British policy. They should, however, be distinguished from independent evidence of deployment, operational performance, or the long-term success of the proposed arrangements.²

These developments expose the central tension in Britain's strategy. British naval capabilities can help deter interference, reduce navigational hazards, and reassure commercial operators. Diplomatic convening can broaden participation and present the protection of shipping as a shared international interest rather than the exclusive concern of one military alliance. At the same time, Britain's close defence relationships—particularly with the United States—can complicate its efforts to appear as a broadly credible supporter of maritime rules. If a protective mission is perceived as part of a wider campaign of geopolitical coercion, its legitimacy and ability to attract diverse partners may weaken. Britain must therefore reconcile the need for credible deterrence with the need for restraint, legal clarity, and diplomatic engagement with relevant regional actors.

This tension raises a broader question about the meaning of a rules-based maritime order. Freedom of navigation is both a legal principle and a strategic interest. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes a transit-passage regime for qualifying straits used for international navigation. Articles 37–44 set out the scope and exercise of transit passage, the duties of ships and aircraft, and the obligations of states bordering straits. Article 44 provides that bordering states must not hamper transit passage and must publicise known dangers to navigation; transit passage is not subject to suspension under that provision (United Nations, 1982). The application of international law to any particular incident nevertheless depends on the facts, relevant treaty obligations, customary international law, and the legal basis for enforcement or military action. A credible defence of navigation must therefore be grounded in legal analysis rather than political slogans alone. The research problem addressed here is that Britain's contribution to Gulf maritime security cannot be assessed adequately by describing naval deployments or diplomatic statements in isolation. The key issue is whether British action can translate operational capability into durable political influence and a more predictable maritime order. Existing analysis of British Gulf policy highlights the continuity of its defence relationships and the limits of the “Global Britain” agenda in transforming the country's regional position (Devanny & Berry, 2021). Building on this scholarship, the article connects Britain's response to Hormuz with three broader questions: how regional security dynamics shape maritime crises; how international law constrains both coastal-state action and external naval operations; and how a state with substantial but finite capabilities can contribute to collective security without deepening the rivalries it seeks to manage. The article argues that Britain can make a meaningful contribution to a more stable Gulf security order by combining credible maritime capabilities with consistent support for international law and inclusive diplomacy. However, its influence is constrained by dependence on multinational partnerships, limited capacity to shape regional rivalries, and the possibility that external military deployments may reinforce the very security dilemmas they are intended to contain. The central claim is therefore that Britain's long-term contribution should be judged not only by its ability to respond to a maritime crisis, but also by whether its actions support practical arrangements that reduce the likelihood of future crises. These might include improved incident communication, information-sharing, cooperation on maritime safety, regional participation in security governance, and transparent procedures for managing navigational hazards.³

The analysis combines three perspectives. Regional Security Complex Theory explains how Gulf rivalries and threat perceptions shape maritime incidents and how external intervention can influence regional security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Maritime security governance highlights the importance of legal rules, operational coordination, and cooperation among states, international organisations, and commercial actors. Middle-power strategy helps explain how Britain seeks influence through partnerships and institutions despite lacking the capacity to determine the regional order unilaterally. Together, these perspectives allow the article to assess both the immediate utility and the wider political consequences of British engagement. The article proceeds through six main sections. It first establishes the theoretical framework linking regional security, maritime governance, and middle-

² Joe Devanny and Philip Berry, “Gulf Security Is Our Security”: Global Britain and UK Gulf Strategy, 2010–20,” *Defence Studies* 21, no. 2 (April 2021): 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1874244>.

³ Kadir Mersin, İrşad Bayırhan, and Orcan Çetinkaya, “Adverse Impacts of Chokepoint Transit Restrictions on Sustainable Maritime Transport: A Scenario-Based Emission Analysis in the Strait of Hormuz,” *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 14, no. 18 (September 2026): 1753, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jmse14181753>.

power strategy. It then examines Britain's strategic role in the Gulf security architecture, including its naval capabilities and relationships with regional and external partners. The third section analyses Hormuz as a strategic chokepoint where maritime coercion can generate wider escalation and economic risks. The fourth evaluates the legal framework governing transit passage, freedom of navigation, and the limits on maritime enforcement and naval operations. The fifth assesses British crisis diplomacy and multinational maritime cooperation, focusing on capabilities, constraints, and contradictions. The final section considers whether Britain can help move the Gulf from recurring emergency responses toward a more resilient security order based on legal consistency, regional participation, and practical cooperation. The conclusion returns to the central question: whether Britain's use of power can protect freedom of navigation while helping to create conditions in which it no longer needs to be defended through repeated crisis mobilisation.

Theoretical Framework: Maritime Security, Regional Security Orders, and Middle-Power Strategy

Understanding Britain's role in the evolving Gulf security order requires an approach that connects regional power competition, maritime governance, international law, and the strategic behaviour of an external power with significant but finite resources. The Strait of Hormuz is not merely a narrow corridor for energy transportation. It is a political and strategic space in which regional rivalries, global economic interdependence, naval power, and legal rules intersect. Britain's policy therefore cannot be assessed only by counting deployments or describing diplomatic statements. It must be examined through the relationship between regional security dynamics, the governance of international navigation, and the methods through which a state seeks influence without being able to control outcomes unilaterally. This article combines Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), maritime security governance, and middle-power strategy to develop that explanation. Regional Security Complex Theory, associated with Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, argues that security interdependence is often geographically concentrated. States located close to one another are likely to be more directly affected by each other's military capabilities, political intentions, and threat perceptions than by those of distant states. A regional security complex exists when the principal security concerns of states are sufficiently interlinked that they cannot be understood independently (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Gulf illustrates this pattern. Iran and the Arab Gulf monarchies assess naval deployments, sanctions, maritime incidents, missile capabilities, and external alliances through longstanding concerns about regional influence and regime security. An incident involving a tanker may consequently be understood not as a discrete law-enforcement event, but as a signal in a wider strategic contest.⁴

RSCT helps explain why a confrontation in or near Hormuz can have consequences beyond the vessel or state immediately involved. A maritime seizure, an attack on a ship, or a threat to restrict passage can influence regional threat perceptions, raise insurance costs, affect energy markets, and prompt external military deployments. Those deployments may reassure partners, yet they may also be interpreted by adversaries as evidence of encirclement or coercive intent. The resulting security dilemma is particularly acute where actors regard defensive measures by others as potentially offensive. In such circumstances, the political meaning assigned to an incident can matter as much as its immediate material consequences. However, RSCT alone does not fully explain the global significance of Hormuz. The strait connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and wider maritime routes, and its use is tied to international energy markets and commercial supply chains. The security of the waterway therefore cannot be reduced to the regional balance of power. Global actors have interests in navigation through a corridor situated within a regional security complex, and their actions can alter the local balance they seek to manage. This interaction between regional insecurity and global dependence calls for a second theoretical lens: maritime security governance. Maritime security governance shifts the focus from military capabilities alone to the rules, institutions, practices, and

⁴ Joe Devanny and Philip Berry, "'Gulf Security Is Our Security': Global Britain and UK Gulf Strategy, 2010-20," *Defence Studies* 21, no. 2 (April 2021): 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1874244>.

cooperative arrangements through which maritime activity is regulated and protected. It includes safeguarding commercial shipping, improving maritime-domain awareness, reducing risks to seafarers, preventing unlawful interference, coordinating responses to incidents, and maintaining predictable navigation. Such governance involves states, naval forces, coast guards, port authorities, international organisations, shipping companies, insurers, and other private actors. Security at sea is consequently a collective-action problem: even a capable navy cannot by itself provide reliable safety for every commercial vessel or resolve the political disputes that generate maritime risks. International law is a central part of this governance framework. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes a regime of transit passage through straits used for international navigation that connect one part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone with another. Articles 37–44 address the scope and exercise of transit passage, the duties of ships and aircraft, sea lanes and traffic separation schemes, and the obligations of states bordering straits. Article 44 provides that bordering states must not hamper transit passage and must publicise known dangers to navigation; the right of transit passage is not subject to suspension under that article (United Nations, 1982). Application to specific disputes requires careful attention to the text, relevant customary international law, treaty participation, and the facts of each incident. The point for this article is that maritime order rests not simply on who possesses the strongest fleet, but also on shared expectations about lawful conduct. Governance, however, should not be equated with the existence of rules on paper. Rules have practical value only when states interpret them credibly, communicate during crises, and possess mechanisms to investigate incidents and reduce escalation. Where trust is low, actors may contest the legality of each other's conduct, and commercial operators may respond to uncertainty by delaying voyages or increasing insurance premiums. Conversely, information-sharing and operational deconfliction can lower the risk of miscalculation even where deeper political disputes remain unresolved. Britain's contribution should therefore be evaluated by whether it supports predictable navigation and cooperative risk management, rather than solely by the number of warships it deploys.⁵

The third lens is middle-power strategy. Britain retains advanced naval capabilities, diplomatic networks, intelligence resources, defence relationships, and a permanent role in international institutions. Nevertheless, it cannot independently determine the Gulf's regional balance or guarantee Hormuz's security. Its influence depends on combining military assets with alliances, diplomatic convening, legal arguments, and contributions to multinational arrangements. In this article, "middle-power strategy" describes a mode of influence pursued through partnerships and institutional cooperation under conditions of limited unilateral control; it does not imply that Britain lacks major-power capabilities in every domain. Research on Britain's Gulf policy supports the importance of this distinction. Devanny and Berry (2021) argue that the "Global Britain" agenda did not create an entirely new Gulf strategy. It largely continued a pattern of bilateral relationships, defence cooperation, and economic engagement developed over preceding decades. Their analysis also raises the question of whether military presence necessarily produces corresponding political influence. A state may provide ships, personnel, intelligence, or specialist capabilities while remaining dependent on partners' political choices and the wider strategic environment. Britain must also manage its relationship with the United States, European partners, Gulf governments, and regional actors with whom it may disagree on broader security questions. Middle-power strategy entails a balance between credibility and restraint. If Britain contributes too little, partners may question its reliability and commercial operators may receive limited reassurance. If it commits to an expansive military role without sufficient political coordination, it risks overextension, entanglement in regional rivalries, or an appearance of selective enforcement. Its most effective approach is likely to combine proportionate naval capability with diplomatic engagement, transparent legal reasoning, intelligence-sharing, mine-countermeasure capacity, and channels for crisis communication. This approach also recognises that a durable maritime order cannot be imposed solely from outside the region. The three perspectives are therefore complementary. RSCT explains the regional rivalries and security dilemmas that shape maritime incidents. Maritime security governance identifies the legal and institutional arrangements that can reduce risks and sustain navigation. Middle-power strategy explains how Britain attempts to influence those arrangements without controlling the regional order. Together, they establish three criteria for

⁵ Wojciech Grabowski, "Application of the Regional Security Complex Theory for Security Analysis in the Persian Gulf," *Athenaeum Poliske Studia Politologiczne* 2020, no. Vol. 68 (2020): 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2020.68.02>.

evaluating British policy: whether it contributes to stability, whether it applies maritime-law principles consistently, and whether it strengthens cooperation without unnecessarily intensifying confrontation. The central proposition is that Britain's most consequential contribution lies not in dominating Hormuz, but in connecting credible maritime capabilities with legal legitimacy and diplomatic cooperation. This framework guides the following analysis of Britain's regional role, the crisis itself, the applicable law, and the prospects for a more resilient Gulf security order.⁶

Britain's Strategic Role in the Evolving Gulf Security Architecture

Britain's role in Gulf security is shaped by a long historical presence, enduring defence relationships, contemporary maritime capabilities, and the changing distribution of power across the region. Yet historical continuity should not be confused with unchallenged authority. The contemporary Gulf is not a security space in which Britain can set the rules independently. Regional governments have their own security priorities, Iran remains a central actor in the regional balance, the United States retains a much larger military footprint, and other powers—including France and China—pursue economic and strategic interests. Britain's position is best understood as that of an influential external partner whose ability to shape outcomes depends on cooperation, credibility, and the political legitimacy of its actions. British involvement in the Gulf developed through imperial relationships, maritime trade, and the protection of routes linking Europe and Asia. The end of Britain's formal protectorate arrangements in the region did not eliminate its security interests. Instead, the relationship evolved toward bilateral defence agreements, training, arms sales, intelligence cooperation, and a continuing naval presence. This legacy has provided British policymakers with access and institutional familiarity, but it also creates ambiguity. Some regional partners value Britain's experience and capabilities, while others may associate its involvement with older hierarchies or the persistence of external dependence. Historical ties therefore function as both an asset and a constraint. The contemporary British presence is reflected in its regional defence relationships and maritime activity. Bahrain hosts the United Kingdom's naval support facility, which provides a platform for regional operations and cooperation. The Royal Navy has maintained forward-deployed mine-countermeasure capabilities in the Gulf, alongside other naval and support assets over time. These capabilities are strategically relevant because a threat to navigation need not involve a large conventional naval battle. Mines, small craft, drones, surveillance, and attacks on commercial vessels can disrupt shipping while imposing disproportionate costs on operators and governments. Mine countermeasures, maritime surveillance, and the ability to coordinate with commercial shipping can therefore be more immediately useful than a purely symbolic display of major combat power. Britain's National Strategy for Maritime Security identifies protection of strategic sea lanes, freedom of navigation, compliance with UNCLOS, and cooperation across government and industry as key objectives (UK Government, 2022). This policy framing is significant because it places Hormuz within a wider understanding of maritime security that includes trade, infrastructure, and international rules. It also recognises that military activity is only one component of a broader national response. Intelligence sharing, diplomacy, industry engagement, and information about maritime risks are essential to keeping commercial routes usable. The strategy provides a useful statement of policy, although an official strategy document should be treated as evidence of declared priorities rather than proof that the objectives have been fully achieved. Britain's Gulf security architecture is also built through multinational cooperation. The Combined Maritime Forces, headquartered in Bahrain, provide a framework for maritime security cooperation among participating states. Other arrangements have focused on protecting shipping and responding to threats in the wider region. Multinational mechanisms can distribute operational responsibilities, improve information exchange, and signal that maritime security is not simply a bilateral dispute between Iran and one Western state. They also create a platform for smaller contributors to provide specialised assets. However, coalitions

⁶ Dennis Senam Amable, "Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions: An Adaptation for the Regional Security Complex Theory," *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 2022): ksac065, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac065>.

are not automatically cohesive. Participants may disagree over the threat assessment, rules of engagement, legal justification, acceptable levels of risk, and the relationship between defensive maritime protection and broader military campaigns. The relationship with the United States remains central. British forces have often operated alongside American forces, and the two countries share intelligence and broad interests in maintaining open maritime routes. Yet close cooperation can complicate Britain's diplomatic position. If British action is perceived as inseparable from a US strategy of coercion, its ability to present itself as a facilitator of wider international cooperation may be reduced. Britain must therefore distinguish its commitment to protecting commercial navigation from automatic endorsement of every US policy toward Iran. Operational interoperability and political independence are not mutually exclusive, but maintaining both requires clear public objectives, carefully defined mandates, and sustained diplomatic communication.⁷

France and European partners provide another important dimension. European governments share interests in energy security, commercial navigation, and the protection of seafarers, but their approaches to regional diplomacy have not always been identical. Cooperation with France can increase the political breadth and practical capacity of a maritime initiative. The April 2026 UK–France-led international summit on the Strait of Hormuz brought together a broad group of states and emphasised freedom of navigation, international law, global economic stability, and a diplomatic settlement. The joint statement also described plans for a strictly defensive multinational mission to protect merchant vessels and support mine clearance when conditions permit (UK Government, 2026a). This initiative illustrates how Britain can use diplomatic convening to widen the coalition beyond its closest security partners. The subsequent announcement in May 2026 of British contributions to a proposed multinational mission further demonstrates the combination of diplomacy and specialist capability. The UK government stated that it intended to contribute autonomous mine-hunting equipment, counter-drone systems, Typhoon aircraft, and HMS Dragon, backed by additional funding for mine-hunting and counter-drone systems (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026b). Such announcements are relevant evidence of policy intention and planned contributions; they should not be interpreted as confirmation that every asset has deployed or that the mission has become fully operational. The distinction between political commitment, operational readiness, and actual performance is essential to a rigorous assessment. Britain's role also intersects with Gulf states' own strategic agency. Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates do not share identical threat perceptions or foreign-policy priorities. Oman has historically maintained channels of communication with actors across regional divides, while other Gulf governments have placed greater emphasis on deterrence, defence modernisation, and security partnerships. A British policy that treats the Gulf as a single, unified bloc risks misunderstanding these differences. Effective engagement requires recognising local priorities and avoiding assumptions that regional partners will automatically support a particular coalition or operational plan. The key strategic question is whether British activity creates durable public goods or simply reinforces a pattern of external military dependence. Specialist capabilities and reliable diplomatic coordination can help protect shipping and reduce the likelihood of miscalculation. Yet recurring crises may also encourage regional actors to rely on outside forces rather than develop common mechanisms for maritime communication and incident management. Britain's influence is therefore strongest when it supports regional capacity, transparent legal standards, and practical cooperation among states that do not necessarily trust one another. Britain's position in the evolving Gulf architecture is neither hegemonic nor marginal. It has meaningful assets, historical access, and the capacity to convene partners, but it faces material constraints and political trade-offs. The effectiveness of its strategy depends on matching resources to achievable objectives, maintaining a clear distinction between defensive maritime protection and wider military campaigns, and working with regional states rather than treating them merely as recipients of external security. The next section examines how these strengths and constraints are tested by the crisis surrounding the Strait of Hormuz.⁸

⁷ Mohd Hazmi Bin Mohd Rusli, "The Application of Transit Passage Regime in Straits Used for International Navigation: A Study of the S Traits of M Alacca and S Ingapore," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 4 (October 2012): 549–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01374.x>.

⁸ Said Mahmoudi, "Customary International Law and Transit Passage," *Ocean Development & International Law* 20, no. 2 (January 1989): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908328909545887>.

The Strait of Hormuz Crisis: Strategic Chokepoints, Maritime Coercion, and Escalation Risks

The Strait of Hormuz occupies an exceptional position in the international political economy because it connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the wider Indian Ocean. Its narrow geography concentrates a large volume of energy transport and commercial traffic into a limited maritime space. This makes the strait a strategic chokepoint: disruption does not need to involve the permanent physical closure of the waterway to impose substantial economic and political costs. Threats against ships, selective restrictions, mines, drone attacks, seizures, or uncertainty about safe passage can cause shipping companies and insurers to change behaviour. The crisis must therefore be understood as a combination of material vulnerability, coercive signalling, regional rivalry, and global economic exposure. The economic importance of Hormuz is well established. The US Energy Information Administration has repeatedly identified the strait as a critical route for global oil flows, with approximately one-fifth of global petroleum liquids consumption passing through it in recent years. The precise volume changes over time with production, demand, sanctions, and shipping patterns, so quantitative claims should always be tied to a specified year and source. Britain's National Strategy for Maritime Security similarly describes Hormuz as a key strategic chokepoint and notes that disruption could have far-reaching effects on energy prices and the wider global economy (UK Government, 2022). The importance of the strait extends beyond oil: liquefied natural gas, petrochemicals, container traffic, and other cargoes contribute to its significance for global supply chains. A chokepoint creates strategic leverage because the costs of disruption are distributed unevenly. A state or armed actor may be able to threaten shipping with relatively inexpensive capabilities, while importing economies, energy companies, shipping firms, and consumers bear much larger financial consequences. The threat itself can influence behaviour even if a full closure never occurs. Commercial operators may reroute vessels where possible, delay voyages, increase security measures, or demand higher insurance premiums. These reactions can magnify the economic impact of a crisis and create pressure on governments to respond. In this sense, maritime coercion operates through expectations and risk as well as through direct physical damage. The crisis surrounding Hormuz in 2026 has demonstrated how quickly maritime security can become linked to wider military confrontation. In April 2026, the United Kingdom and France convened an international summit focused on freedom of navigation and the reopening of the strait. Their joint statement called for unrestricted passage, stressed the importance of international law and global economic stability, and proposed the development of a strictly defensive multinational mission to protect merchant shipping and support mine clearance when conditions allowed (UK Government, 2026a). The statement is evidence of the diplomatic response and the participating governments' declared objectives. It should not, by itself, be taken as independent verification of every allegation made by parties to the conflict.⁹

In May, the UK and France announced further political support for a multinational mission, with participating states emphasising civilian shipping protection, reassurance for commercial operators, mine clearance, coordination with relevant states, and deconfliction from other military activity (UK Government, 2026b). Britain also announced planned contributions involving mine-hunting equipment, counter-drone systems, aircraft, and a warship (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026c). These developments illustrate a strategy aimed at restoring commercial confidence through collective defensive capability rather than claiming that one state can control the strait. The distinction between a planned mission and an operational one remains important, particularly where the security environment may prevent deployment or constrain rules of engagement. Maritime incidents have several possible strategic functions. They can be used to signal resolve, retaliate for actions taken elsewhere, raise the cost of sanctions or military pressure, demonstrate the vulnerability of international trade, or deter adversaries from further action. They can also be driven by local command decisions, misidentification, or rapidly changing circumstances. Analysts should therefore avoid assuming that every incident follows a single centrally directed strategy unless evidence supports that conclusion. The

⁹ Sam Bateman, "Maritime Security Governance in the Indian Ocean Region," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 12, no. 1 (January 2016): 5–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2016.1138709>.

same event may be interpreted differently by the state carrying it out, the targeted vessel's flag state, nearby coastal states, and external naval powers. These differences in interpretation can intensify escalation risks. The military geography of Hormuz makes these risks especially acute. The waterway is narrow, commercial and military vessels may operate in proximity, and surveillance can occur from multiple platforms. Mines and small unmanned systems may complicate navigation and raise the cost of clearance. A naval escort or interception may be intended as defensive, but it can be misinterpreted as preparation for attack. Rules of engagement, communications, and the ability to distinguish hostile action from ambiguous behaviour are consequently essential. Even technically successful defensive operations may produce strategic costs if they are accompanied by inflammatory rhetoric or unclear political objectives. Energy markets are a major channel through which a regional crisis acquires global consequences. When the prospect of disruption increases, traders may price in supply risk, while import-dependent economies face higher costs and uncertainty. The effects are not uniform: countries with alternative supply routes, strategic reserves, diversified energy sources, or lower dependence on Gulf exports may be less exposed than others. Poorer importing states can be particularly vulnerable because energy price increases can affect transport, food production, electricity costs, and public budgets. A prolonged crisis can therefore intensify inequality between states and place pressure on governments already facing fiscal constraints.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the global economic impact of a Hormuz crisis should not be reduced to oil prices alone. Maritime disruption can affect shipping schedules, port operations, cargo insurance, access to industrial inputs, and confidence in supply chains. The costs may persist after physical passage resumes because firms need time to reposition vessels, clear backlogs, and reassess risk. This creates a strong international interest in predictable navigation and rapid, credible communication about maritime conditions. It also explains why a response involving a broad coalition and engagement with the shipping industry may have greater legitimacy than an operation framed as the unilateral project of one power. The crisis presents a dilemma for external powers. Inaction may allow coercion to become normalised and undermine confidence in the security of international shipping. Yet a heavily militarised response can increase the likelihood of confrontation, particularly if operations are perceived as part of a wider campaign against a regional state. A defensive mission must therefore define its purpose narrowly, make its legal basis clear, establish channels for deconfliction, and specify the conditions under which it will operate. It should also maintain diplomatic engagement and avoid promising a level of protection that naval forces cannot realistically guarantee. For Britain, Hormuz is both a test of maritime capability and a test of strategic judgement. Its contribution can help reduce navigational risk, support mine clearance, and reassure commercial operators, but the limits of naval protection must be acknowledged. No escort system can remove every threat, and military operations cannot substitute for a political settlement. The crisis ultimately reveals the vulnerability of a global economic system that depends on concentrated maritime routes while the political order surrounding those routes remains contested. A durable response must combine credible defensive measures with legal consistency, regional diplomacy, and efforts to prevent future incidents from becoming self-reinforcing cycles of retaliation.¹¹

International Law and Freedom of Navigation: The Legal Limits of Maritime Power

International law is central to the Strait of Hormuz because the waterway is simultaneously part of the maritime environment of coastal states and a passage of exceptional importance to international navigation. The legal challenge is to reconcile coastal-state sovereignty and legitimate security interests with the rights of ships transiting a strait used for international navigation. Neither proposition is absolute. Coastal states retain legal authority over their territorial seas, but that authority must be

¹⁰ Abdul Mustafa Azhari, Samiullah Azhari, and Dr. Muhammad Idrees Yaqooq, "Global Transformations in Law, Justice, and Society: Comparative Perspectives on Governance, Rights, and Legal Reform," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (December 2025): 60–90, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.7>.

¹¹ Ahmed Abdullah Muhammed Al Dhahli, Meshari Al Daihani, and Fadillah Bt Mansor, "The Future of International Commercial Arbitration in Islamic Jurisdictions: Harmonizing Global Standards with Sharia Principles," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (June 2026): 48–68, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.2.2026.17>.

exercised consistently with the applicable rules governing passage. Equally, states using the strait cannot assume that freedom of navigation exempts their vessels from all legal obligations. A sound assessment of Britain's role therefore requires careful attention to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), customary international law, the law on the use of force, and the legal status of particular operations. UNCLOS Part III establishes the regime for straits used for international navigation. Article 37 identifies the relevant category of straits connecting one part of the high seas or an exclusive economic zone with another. Article 38 provides for the right of transit passage, subject to the Convention's terms. Transit passage involves the exercise of freedom of navigation and overflight for continuous and expeditious transit through the strait. Article 39 sets out duties for ships and aircraft, including proceeding without delay, refraining from threats or uses of force inconsistent with the UN Charter, and refraining from activities unrelated to their normal modes of continuous and expeditious transit. Articles 41 and 42 address sea lanes, traffic separation schemes, and certain regulations that states bordering straits may adopt. Article 44 requires bordering states not to hamper transit passage and to publicise known dangers to navigation; the right of transit passage is not subject to suspension under this provision (United Nations, 1982). These provisions establish an important balance. Transit passage is not a general licence for vessels to conduct any activity they choose. Ships must comply with the relevant obligations, and coastal states retain powers provided by international law. However, the coastal state's authority cannot be used to negate the passage regime. Measures that effectively make transit conditional on political permission, impose unlawful restrictions, or systematically obstruct international navigation raise serious legal questions. In any specific dispute, the analysis must establish what measure was taken, where it occurred, which vessels were affected, the applicable legal regime, and whether the measure is justified under the relevant rules. Broad political statements about "closure" or "control" should not replace this case-specific legal assessment.¹²

A further complication concerns treaty participation. Iran is not a party to UNCLOS, a fact that matters to claims based exclusively on treaty obligations. It does not follow, however, that every rule in UNCLOS is irrelevant to Iran or that the legal status of passage is settled simply by citing the Convention. Some provisions may reflect customary international law, while the scope and status of particular rules can be disputed. The legal analysis must distinguish treaty obligations binding on parties from rules that may apply more broadly as customary law. This distinction is particularly important when governments use legal arguments to legitimise policy in a highly politicised environment. A credible legal position should acknowledge contested issues rather than assume that all states accept the same interpretation. The law of the sea must also be distinguished from the law governing the use of force. A vessel's interference with another ship may raise questions of maritime jurisdiction, safety, or unlawful coercion, but not every incident automatically constitutes an armed attack. The United Nations Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or otherwise inconsistently with the purposes of the United Nations. Article 51 preserves the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs, subject to the Charter's conditions. A state invoking self-defence must assess necessity and proportionality, and it must report measures taken to the Security Council as the Charter requires (United Nations, 1945). These rules do not remove the need to establish facts about the incident and the legal basis for a response. Naval operations intended to protect commercial shipping likewise require a clearly defined legal basis. Depending on the circumstances, that basis may involve consent from a coastal state, self-defence, a relevant Security Council authorisation, or another recognised legal justification. A general interest in freedom of navigation does not by itself create an unrestricted right to use force in another state's territorial sea. The legal status of escorts, interdictions, mine-clearance operations, and surveillance activity must be evaluated in relation to the location, mandate, conduct, and consent involved. An operation described as defensive is not automatically lawful merely because of its label; its actual methods and effects matter. The distinction between peacetime maritime enforcement and armed conflict is also important. During an armed conflict, international humanitarian law may govern

¹² Audyna Putri Kaslam et al., *The Contemporary Three-Kilogram LPG Gas Restriction Policy from a Fiqh Siyasah Perspective: Its Impact and Influence on the Welfare of Muslim Communities*, July 31, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.17350809>.

the conduct of hostilities, including rules concerning distinction, proportionality, precautions, and the protection of civilians. Yet the existence of a broader conflict does not automatically suspend the law of the sea or eliminate the rights of neutral shipping. The applicable legal regimes may operate concurrently. Governments must therefore avoid treating a security crisis as a legal vacuum in which ordinary navigation rules no longer matter. This is one reason transparent mandates and legal advice are essential for multinational maritime missions. Freedom of navigation is not merely a strategic slogan. It is a legal and economic interest that supports international commerce and reduces the ability of individual actors to impose arbitrary costs on other states. Nevertheless, the phrase can be deployed selectively. States may defend navigation when their own ships or commercial interests are affected while overlooking similar concerns elsewhere. Such selectivity weakens the legitimacy of the rules-based order and allows opponents to portray legal language as a cover for power politics. Britain's credibility depends on applying principles consistently, including when doing so constrains its partners or requires acknowledging uncertainty about a particular incident.¹³

International institutions can help strengthen legal consistency. The International Maritime Organization provides a forum for cooperation on shipping safety and security, while the United Nations offers broader mechanisms for diplomacy and legal debate. In July 2026, reporting on an IMO Council decision described strong objections to unilateral efforts to establish control over traffic through Hormuz and calls for states not to recognise measures aimed at closing, obstructing, or interfering with international navigation (Reuters, 2026). Because reporting on institutional decisions may summarise complex legal positions, the official decision and relevant legal texts should be consulted directly before relying on a specific formulation in a final scholarly submission. The episode nevertheless illustrates the importance of multilateral institutions in contesting claims of unilateral control. For Britain, the legal challenge is to connect operational effectiveness with legitimacy. Naval assets can help protect shipping, but the legal basis for their use must be explicit, the mission's scope proportionate, and the rules of engagement consistent with international law. Britain should also distinguish legal argument from political messaging, avoid overstating the certainty of contested doctrines, and support investigations that establish facts about maritime incidents. Legal consistency does not guarantee compliance by other actors, but it helps preserve coalition cohesion and limits the risk that protective measures become another source of escalation. The central legal conclusion is that freedom of navigation through Hormuz must be defended within—not outside—the international legal order. Coastal states retain rights and responsibilities, ships must observe applicable duties, and naval powers remain constrained by the law of the sea and the UN Charter. A sustainable security order requires more than the physical capacity to keep a route open: it requires credible rules, consistent application, transparent justification, and mechanisms through which disagreements can be managed without turning every maritime incident into a wider military confrontation.¹⁴

British Crisis Diplomacy and Maritime Security Cooperation: Capabilities, Constraints, and Contradictions

Britain's response to a crisis in the Strait of Hormuz requires the coordination of diplomatic, military, legal, and economic instruments. The central challenge is to protect commercial navigation without transforming a defensive maritime effort into another front in a wider regional conflict. British crisis diplomacy is therefore best assessed through the relationship between its public objectives, the practical capabilities it can contribute, the coalition it can sustain, and the restraint it demonstrates in the use of force. The 2026 crisis provides a useful contemporary case because Britain has pursued international coordination while also announcing planned naval and technical contributions. Diplomacy serves several functions in a maritime crisis. It can clarify the objectives of participating states, build political support for collective action, communicate concerns to regional actors, establish channels for deconfliction, and help create conditions in which commercial shipping can resume. It

¹³ Bagus Khusfi Satyo, S.H., M.Kn. and Bagus Agung Yuda Prasetyo, S.H., M.Kn, "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Human Rights: Legal Accountability for Algorithmic Decision-Making in Democratic Societies.," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (April 2026): 54–74, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.1.2026.12>.

¹⁴ Faheem Ullah Al Azhari and Sajid Iqbal Al Azhari, "Contemporary Challenges in Harmonizing Sharia, National Legal Systems, and International Law in a Rapidly Changing World," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (December 2025): 130–50, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.4>.

can also reduce the risk that a defensive deployment is misunderstood as preparation for offensive action. Diplomatic engagement is not a substitute for capability: statements alone cannot clear mines or protect vessels from immediate threats. But military capability without a clear diplomatic framework can lack legitimacy, fracture a coalition, or increase the risk of miscalculation. The effectiveness of a response depends on integrating both dimensions. The UK–France-led summit of 17 April 2026 illustrated Britain’s attempt to widen the diplomatic basis for action. The joint statement reported that 51 countries had been convened and emphasised freedom of navigation, international law, energy security, global economic stability, and the need for a comprehensive diplomatic settlement. It called for the immediate reopening of the strait and described plans for an independent, strictly defensive multinational mission to protect merchant vessels and support mine clearance when conditions permitted (UK Government, 2026a). The initiative’s breadth was politically important: a large coalition can communicate that safe navigation is a shared international interest rather than the exclusive concern of one military alliance.¹⁵

The statement also recognised that maritime security involves commercial actors. Shipping companies, insurers, port authorities, and seafarers must assess whether voyages are safe and economically viable. Governments may provide escorts or surveillance, but the return of normal commercial activity depends on credible information, risk assessments, insurance arrangements, and confidence that the security situation will remain manageable. Engagement with the maritime industry is therefore not an ancillary task. It is part of the mechanism through which diplomatic and military measures translate into restored trade. On 12 May 2026, the UK and France convened defence ministers and representatives from participating states to advance political support for a multinational military mission. The joint statement described a proposed effort to support civilian shipping, reassure commercial operators, and conduct mine clearance, while stressing that operations would begin only in a permissive environment and in accordance with international law and national constitutional procedures (UK Government, 2026b). These qualifications are important. They acknowledge that political agreement does not automatically produce an executable operation, and that states may impose national caveats on the forces they contribute. The mission’s effectiveness would depend on command arrangements, intelligence-sharing, logistics, rules of engagement, force protection, and a clear process for responding to incidents. Britain’s announced contribution included autonomous mine-hunting equipment, counter-drone systems, Typhoon aircraft, and HMS Dragon, supported by new funding for mine-hunting and counter-drone capabilities (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026c). These assets address different dimensions of the threat. Mine-hunting equipment can support the detection and clearance of explosive hazards; counter-drone systems can help protect vessels and facilities from unmanned aerial threats; aircraft can contribute to surveillance and situational awareness; and a warship can provide presence, communications, and protective capacity. The mix reflects the reality that contemporary maritime security is not solely a contest between conventional fleets. Low-cost systems and asymmetric tactics can impose serious risks on high-value naval and commercial assets. However, capabilities must be evaluated against constraints. First, Britain’s naval resources are finite. Commitments in the Gulf compete with requirements in the North Atlantic, European waters, the Indo-Pacific, and other operational theatres. Second, high-intensity conditions may make the deployment of specialist assets unsafe or ineffective. Third, multinational operations require shared threat assessments and clear rules for the use of force. Fourth, a mission may reassure some regional partners while provoking opposition from others. Finally, a naval presence can reduce risk but cannot guarantee the safety of every vessel. These constraints should shape policy statements and prevent governments from implying that military deployment alone can resolve the crisis. A central contradiction concerns the relationship between maritime protection and wider geopolitical coercion. Britain can argue that navigation should not be obstructed while maintaining close defence cooperation with the United States and Gulf partners. Yet the perception that a maritime mission is integrated into a broader campaign against Iran may weaken its ability to attract participants that favour neutrality or

¹⁵ Hasan Khazaal Mahdi, “British Policy Toward Iraq After the 2026 U.S.–Israeli War Against Iran: Strategic Realignments, Regional Security, and International Legal Implications,” *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (June 2026): 01–21, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.2.2026.19>.

diplomatic engagement. A defensive mission therefore needs a clearly delimited mandate, transparent legal reasoning, and credible separation from unrelated offensive operations. This does not require political neutrality toward unlawful conduct; it requires clarity about the specific objective and legal authority of the mission.¹⁶

Another contradiction concerns deterrence. A credible ability to respond to attacks can discourage further interference, but a visible naval build-up may also intensify threat perceptions. Deterrence is most stable when the intended limits are communicated clearly and the opposing side has a way to avoid escalation without appearing to surrender vital interests. Crisis communication, deconfliction arrangements, and diplomatic channels can provide such options. The aim should be to make attacks on shipping less attractive while avoiding a situation in which each side interprets the other's defensive measures as evidence that a larger confrontation is inevitable. Britain's role as a diplomatic convenor is potentially as important as its contribution of platforms. Convening a broad coalition can help coordinate national policies, establish common language about navigation, and support shared approaches to mine clearance and commercial reassurance. But coalition breadth should not be mistaken for consensus on every issue. Participants may agree that shipping should be protected while disagreeing about sanctions, the use of force, the underlying conflict, or the political future of the region. Effective diplomacy should preserve the narrow shared objective rather than demand agreement on every dimension of the crisis. For the initiative to be sustainable, Britain should support a parallel diplomatic track. That track should involve relevant coastal states, reduce the risk of accidental encounters, encourage transparent communication about navigation hazards, and explore practical arrangements for incident notification and investigation. Regional states should be treated as stakeholders in security governance, not simply as territory through which external forces operate. Confidence-building measures may be modest, but even limited agreements on emergency communication, search and rescue, and maritime safety can reduce the chance that an incident escalates. The success of British crisis diplomacy should ultimately be judged against measurable outcomes: whether commercial operators receive credible information, whether maritime hazards are reduced, whether coalition members maintain a common and lawful mandate, whether incidents decline, and whether diplomatic channels remain open. Public announcements and military contributions are inputs, not final outcomes. Britain can make a meaningful contribution, but only if operational plans remain proportionate, legal justifications are clear, and diplomatic engagement continues alongside deterrence. The strategic objective should be to restore safe passage while creating conditions in which the next crisis is less likely to require emergency military mobilisation.¹⁷

Beyond Crisis Management: Britain's Influence and the Future of the Gulf Security Order

The future of the Gulf security order will depend on whether the current crisis produces only a temporary restoration of commercial navigation or encourages more durable arrangements for maritime governance. Britain has the capacity to influence this outcome through diplomacy, naval expertise, specialist technologies, defence partnerships, and support for international law. Yet it cannot independently create a stable regional order. The states of the Gulf retain agency, regional rivalries are rooted in political and strategic disputes that extend beyond maritime navigation, and external powers differ in their priorities. Britain's long-term influence will therefore depend less on the size of a single deployment than on whether it helps establish practices and institutions that make future crises less likely and less damaging. The immediate priority is to reduce navigational risk. Mine clearance, maritime surveillance, information-sharing, and carefully defined protective operations can help restore confidence among commercial operators. But the return of shipping to normal routes is not equivalent to the resolution of the crisis. A waterway may reopen while the underlying incentives for coercion remain. If regional actors continue to regard the strait as an instrument for imposing costs

¹⁶ Ibtesam Ali Khalfan Alhammadi, Mohamad Azrien Mohamed Adnan, and Yusmini Binti Md Yusoff, "Constitutional Protection of Religious Freedom in Muslim-Majority States: Comparative Lessons from Southeast Asia and the Middle East," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (June 2026): 22–47, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.2.2026.18>.

¹⁷ Mujiono and Carrel Ticualu, "Emerging Trends in Law and Social Sciences: Global Perspectives on Policy, Ethics, Justice, and Institutional Reform," *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (December 2025): 40–60, <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.6>.

on adversaries, commercial shipping will remain vulnerable to renewed threats. Crisis management must therefore be linked to longer-term mechanisms for communication, incident prevention, and political dialogue. One possible future is continued reliance on external naval power. Under this model, Britain, the United States, France, and other partners periodically deploy assets to reassure shipping and deter interference. The approach has practical advantages: external navies may possess specialist capabilities, established logistics, intelligence networks, and the ability to assemble multinational forces relatively quickly. For Britain, such missions can demonstrate that its global maritime interests are backed by operational capacity. They may also strengthen partnerships with Gulf governments and reinforce the principle that no single actor should be able to close an international waterway by coercion. Nevertheless, a security order built primarily around repeated external deployments has structural weaknesses. Naval operations are expensive, and participating states face competing commitments. Their domestic political support may fluctuate, while national caveats can limit operational flexibility. External forces may also be perceived as partisan, particularly when maritime security is linked to sanctions or wider military confrontation. If the regional order depends on emergency deployments each time tensions rise, it may reproduce the conditions that make the next crisis difficult to manage. Britain should therefore avoid treating a successful deployment as a sufficient long-term strategy. A second pathway is a more institutionalised approach to regional maritime governance. This would not require immediate agreement on all major political disputes. Instead, states could pursue practical arrangements that address common risks: emergency communications between naval and coastguard units, notification of dangerous maritime activity, shared procedures for search and rescue, channels for reporting suspicious incidents, and cooperation on environmental emergencies. Technical arrangements can sometimes proceed even where diplomatic relations remain strained because they address immediate safety interests rather than demanding strategic trust. Over time, repeated cooperation may create routines that reduce uncertainty and help prevent local incidents from escalating. Such arrangements would be difficult to establish. Regional actors may fear that information-sharing could expose military capabilities or create opportunities for surveillance. They may disagree about which incidents constitute unlawful interference, and they may regard external facilitation as an attempt to impose political conditions. Britain should consequently support flexible, incremental initiatives rather than assume that a single regional institution can solve the problem. Oman and other states able to maintain communication across regional divides may have useful roles in facilitating practical dialogue. External powers can provide technical assistance and diplomatic support, but arrangements are more likely to endure if regional governments view them as serving their own interests.¹⁸

International law should be a foundation of this future order. UNCLOS provides an established framework for transit passage, while the UN Charter regulates the use of force. The legitimacy of maritime governance will be weakened if states invoke these rules only when doing so supports their immediate strategic interests. Britain can contribute by grounding public statements in the relevant legal provisions, supporting multilateral institutions, and recognising that legal questions sometimes require careful factual investigation. It should also avoid implying that military superiority itself confers a right to determine the conditions under which other states may use international waterways. A law-based approach is not guaranteed to prevent violations, but it provides a shared standard by which conduct can be evaluated. Britain's 2026 diplomatic initiative provides a potential foundation for this role. The UK–France-led statement of April 2026 emphasised international law, freedom of navigation, energy security, and a diplomatic settlement, while the subsequent multinational mission proposal focused on defensive protection and mine clearance (UK Government, 2026a; UK Government, 2026b). The initiative could strengthen a cooperative order if it remains transparent, proportionate, and clearly separated from unrelated military objectives. If, by contrast, its mandate becomes ambiguous or its actions are perceived as a tool of wider coercion, the same initiative could deepen divisions and make regional cooperation harder. The strategic relationship between Britain and

¹⁸ Muhammad Azam et al., "E-Contract Withdrawal Rights in E-Commerce: A Comparative Analysis of the Egyptian Consumer Protection Law and Islamic Jurisprudential Perspectives," *Ulu' Albab: Jurnal Studi Dan Penelitian Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (April 2025): 215, <https://doi.org/10.30659/jua.v8i2.44766>.

the Gulf states will also need to evolve. Bilateral defence agreements remain important, but they should be complemented by support for local capacity, maritime safety institutions, and shared procedures. Training, technical assistance, and joint exercises can contribute to long-term resilience, provided they are designed around clear objectives and do not simply expand military dependence. Britain should also engage with the economic and human consequences of maritime disruption. Higher energy and shipping costs affect households, businesses, and import-dependent states far beyond the immediate region. A policy focused only on naval deployments would overlook these broader consequences.¹⁹

Another consideration is the relationship between deterrence and diplomatic inclusion. Britain may need to maintain a credible capability to respond to immediate threats, but its longer-term objective should be to reduce the frequency with which force becomes the principal means of communicating political resolve. This requires retaining channels of contact with adversaries as well as partners. Dialogue does not imply accepting unlawful restrictions on navigation; rather, it can help clarify intentions, reduce miscalculation, and identify limited areas of agreement. A sustainable security architecture needs both the capacity to resist coercion and the mechanisms to prevent confrontations from becoming self-perpetuating. The future order should also be judged by resilience. A resilient maritime system does not assume that crises can be eliminated. It reduces the probability of disruption, limits the consequences when disruption occurs, and recovers quickly. Relevant measures include diversified energy supplies, improved commercial risk communication, contingency planning, effective mine-countermeasure capacity, and reliable coordination between governments and industry. Britain cannot determine the energy policies of importing states or the route choices of every shipping company, but it can contribute to shared information and operational planning. Resilience reduces the leverage that any actor can gain from threatening a single chokepoint. Britain's influence should therefore be evaluated through three questions. Does its policy improve the practical security of navigation? Does it strengthen consistent and legitimate application of international law? Does it help create regional and international mechanisms that reduce dependence on repeated emergency deployments? Positive answers would suggest that Britain is contributing to a more durable order. Negative answers would indicate that its role, despite real operational value, remains largely reactive. The most plausible and constructive British strategy is neither withdrawal nor an ambition to dominate Gulf security. It is a selective, coalition-based contribution that combines specialist naval capabilities with legal consistency, regional engagement, and institutional development. Britain can help protect the Strait of Hormuz, but it cannot resolve every political conflict that threatens it. Its long-term success will depend on whether it uses a crisis to support arrangements that outlast the immediate deployment. The ultimate objective should be a Gulf security order in which freedom of navigation is protected by credible capabilities, accepted legal principles, and practical regional cooperation—not by military power alone.²⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, Britain can play a meaningful role in protecting freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz through effective naval capabilities, international cooperation, and consistent application of international law. However, military deployments alone cannot resolve the regional rivalries and political tensions that threaten maritime security. Britain's long-term effectiveness depends on balancing deterrence with diplomatic engagement, strengthening regional participation, and promoting practical cooperation in maritime safety. Ultimately, a sustainable Gulf security order requires more than military power; it requires legal consistency, mutual trust, and cooperative mechanisms that reduce the risk of future crises.

¹⁹ Muhammad Azam et al., "The Implications of Trade Liberalization on Islamic Economic Ethics in Relation to the WTO Agreement Crisis on Organization of Islamic Countries," *International Journal of Environmental Sciences*, July 17, 2025, 2330–440, <https://doi.org/10.64252/015mam67>.

²⁰ Muhammad Azam et al., "AI-Driven Sharia Governance in Islamic Digital Payment Systems: Developing a Contemporary Islamic Law Framework for Ethical and Regulatory Compliance," *Nusantara: Journal of Law Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2026): 849–80, <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaralaw.v5i2.339>.

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