



Avoiding the Knife Fight: Defeating Iran's Strait Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran has long prepared to close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a major conflict with the United States, hoping to trigger an energy shock, draw US naval forces into a confined battlespace, and impose enough cost to weaken Washington's will. The US has been fully cognizant of Tehran's intent for decades and planned accordingly. In the recent conflict, rather than accept a direct fight inside the Strait on Iranian terms, Washington and Jerusalem widened the campaign, degraded Iran's command structure, air defenses, naval forces, missile infrastructure, and supporting systems, and only then turned more directly to the Strait itself. Even so, reopening the waterway has proved difficult. The IRGC's naval capacity, though significantly diminished, is still sufficient to threaten shipping through mines, small craft, and shore-based systems. As a result, the United States has shifted to a broader indirect approach that combines limited military operations in and around the Strait with strikes and threats of further strikes on vital targets, economic coercion, blockade measures, and a diplomatic alternative. Thus far, that approach appears to be working. Iran's Strait strategy has not forced the United States into the kind of fight Tehran had spent decades anticipating.

Iran's strategy to close the Strait of Hormuz has been well known for years. As long ago as 1993, Iran's parliament passed a law giving itself the right – in violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea – to close the Strait. This position was

reiterated during the 12-Day War of June 2025, when the Iranian parliament voted to close the Strait – though at that time, the IRGC held off from doing so.

Should a major conflict with the US break out, Tehran's longstanding plan was to draw the Americans into a knife fight by closing the Strait and creating an energy and economic crisis that would compel a US naval response. Tehran assumed the US Navy would be drawn into the Strait to reopen it. Moreover, the regime believed it could spring this trap at a time and place of its choosing.

Iran has two navies, the regular navy (IRIN) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN). The IRIN is part of the Artesh (Iran's regular military). Prior to the current conflict, the IRIN consisted of larger surface ships like frigates and corvettes, a few submarines, and a drone carrier. It is the older of the two maritime services, rebuilt after World War II and greatly expanded under the Shah, with ambitions that reached beyond the Gulf into the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Early in the Iran-Iraq War, the IRIN was able to establish sea control and strike Iraqi oil infrastructure. It is associated with the more traditional "fleet side" of Iranian sea power.

The IRGCN, on the other hand, is Iran's specialized asymmetric naval force. Rather than functioning like a conventional blue-water navy, it is designed specifically for fighting in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, where geography, cluttered littoral waters, and short engagement ranges help offset US and allied technological superiority. The IRGCN is the "guerrilla warfare" side of Iran's maritime services.

The IRGCN is built around shore-based antiship cruise missiles, naval mines, small agile boats called FAC/FIAC (fast attack craft and fast inland attack craft), and drones. The shore-based missiles are located in "missile cities" up to 500m (1,640 feet) underground and some sections are underwater, making US strikes difficult.

Iran planned to use both naval arms, the IRIN and the IRGCN, to attrit US naval forces until Washington tired of the conflict. From Tehran's perspective, the logic was sound. The Strait of Hormuz is narrow, crowded, economically vital, and tactically favorable to a defender employing sea denial tactics such as mines and

shore-launched anti-ship missiles. This plan also reflected the broader Iranian belief that the United States tends to lose interest in foreign conflicts when costs rise and victory is not clearly in sight.

The United States has been aware of Iran's plans for the Strait for decades. In fact, Tehran's deterrent logic depended on that awareness. Washington had to know the threat existed for it to influence American decision-making about whether to go to war with Iran in the first place.

In the opening days of the conflict, America's plan to address this threat was revealed. Washington and Jerusalem opened the war at the theater level with decapitation strikes, the destruction of command and control, and the suppression of Iranian air defenses. Once Iran's air defense network and command structure were sufficiently degraded, the United States could strike Iranian naval forces, missile infrastructure, drone facilities, logistics nodes, and other supporting assets with stand-off weapons and aircraft rather than send major surface combatants directly into the Strait. Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs), carrier aviation, land-based aircraft, submarine-fired torpedoes, and even long-range artillery were then brought to bear against Iranian targets without US forces entering the Strait.

By now, the IRIN is largely combat-ineffective if not sunk. The IRIN was meant to provide the IRGCN with conventional naval support. Its frigates, auxiliaries, and submarines provided sensors such as radar and sonar, support fire with missiles and guns, and extended operational reach through drones and helicopters, and it broadened Iran's maritime presence beyond the Strait's immediate approaches in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. In a Strait contingency, the IRIN was intended to support the IRGCN's resistance.

The US sidelined the Strait at the outset of the conflict, but the Iranian naval threat must now be addressed. While it poses a less complicated problem today than it did before the outbreak of hostilities because of the elimination of the IRIN and the degradation of Iran's missiles and drones, the IRGCN's continued presence in the Strait remains a significant challenge.

On March 2, Israel and the US began targeting IRGCN forces. American A-10 Warthog airplanes and AH-64 Apache helicopters began eliminating close-range

elements of the IRGCN's sea-denial network, especially its small craft, swarm staging areas, and coastal launch points. Air-dropped bunker-busting munitions were used against hardened missile sites, tunnel complexes, and buried support infrastructure along the Iranian coast. A US Navy littoral combat ship, the USS Santa Barbara, was used to launch multiple LUCAS one-way attack drones; this was not part of the ship's original design, but the improvisation was surprisingly successful.

On March 10, the United States reported that it had "eliminated" 16 Iranian mine-laying vessels near Hormuz. There remains some ambiguity as to whether the IRGC actually mined the Strait. In an abundance of caution, the US is actively hunting for mines that may have been laid. (Mine hunting is the process of locating and identifying individual mines for destruction, while mine sweeping clears an area more broadly. Hunting takes longer, but it offers greater confidence that an area has been cleared.)

The US Navy has four Avenger-class mine countermeasures ships in the region and two littoral combat ships: the aforementioned USS Santa Barbara and the USS Tulsa, which have been augmented with counter-mine capabilities. These forces have some of the Navy's most advanced mine-countermeasure resources, including unmanned undersea systems, helicopters, and divers. The MH-60S Seahawk, for example, can employ the Airborne Laser Mine Detection System to locate mines from the air and then help neutralize them. At the same time, the Knifefish unmanned undersea vehicle can hunt mines below the surface while keeping its mothership out of danger.

But these capabilities are not enough. The IRGCN, though significantly degraded, still retains enough capability - including FACs, FIACs, and shore-based missile systems - to threaten commercial shipping in the Strait. For this reason, the United States is taking additional measures in parallel with operations in the Strait.

There is little doubt that the US could engage in direct military action to secure the Strait, but this would require significant land forces in addition to further air and maritime operations. There would be a cost in both American blood and treasure, and if the action did not end quickly, it could become a political liability. For these reasons, the Trump administration is actively pursuing alternative means to the

direct military option to achieve the desired end state, including making diplomatic overtures.

One indirect measure has been to attempt to compel Tehran to reopen the Strait by striking vital targets, with a threat to strike even more. These attacks are aimed at the regime's capacity to continue the confrontation. Targets include leadership, command and control, missile infrastructure, naval forces, air defenses, logistics nodes, and key elements of the regime's economic base. The purpose is to impose cumulative strategic costs, degrade Iran's coercive tools, and convince Tehran that keeping the Strait closed will cause the regime greater harm than reopening it.

The US has also embarked on an economic pressure campaign against Iran called Operation Economic Fury. This operation is centered on fully enforced oil sanctions, action against sanctions-evasion networks, and pressure on the shipping and financial channels that keep Iranian exports moving. The US Treasury has sanctioned 29 new targets, including three individuals, 17 companies, and nine vessels tied to Iranian oil smuggling and associated financing networks as part of the broader economic pressure campaign.

The most visible portion of Operation Economic Fury is a maritime blockade, a clear demonstration of economic coercion bolstered by the credible use of force to compel compliance. This tactic echoes the naval blockade the US employed to weaken Venezuela before Maduro's ouster. That blockade brought the Venezuelan economy to the brink of collapse by strangling the nation's oil revenues.

The current US blockade, originally framed as targeting the Strait, is more accurately described as a blockade against ships calling at and departing from Iranian ports and terminals. A few vessels carrying crude from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq - not Iran - have successfully exited the Persian Gulf. US Central Command (CENTCOM) clarified that as part of the blockade, "all Iranian vessels, vessels with active Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions, and vessels suspected of carrying contraband (weapon parts, nuclear components, precursors, etc.), are subject to belligerent right to visit and search."

Through all of this, Washington is leaving open a diplomatic off-ramp. If Iran accepts American red lines, especially with respect to its nuclear weapons program,

and reopening the Strait is folded into a broader agreement, Washington could end the war and provide some measure of sanctions relief. In this sense, diplomacy is not separate from coercion but part of the same strategy. Military pressure, economic coercion, and diplomatic opportunities are being applied together to persuade Tehran that compliance is less costly than continued resistance.

In the end, Iran's long-prepared Strait strategy failed. Rather than rush major naval forces into a confined battlespace built for attrition, Washington and Jerusalem widened the fight, dismantled key elements of Iran's military system, and then combined limited operations in and around the Strait with economic coercion and diplomatic pressure. The remaining challenge is real, as the IRGCN can still threaten shipping in the Strait. However, Tehran has lost whatever influence it had on the initiative or direction of the campaign.

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