

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Freedom of Navigation in the Strait of Hormuz

LTC Mohammad Alkharabsheh, JOR Army (CSAG/CCJ5)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject:** “Freedom of Navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.”
2. **Purpose:** To analyze the concept of freedom of navigation as a fundamental principle of international maritime law, with a focus on how maritime security missions have been executed in the past, the actors involved, and the mechanisms through which states and naval forces are integrated into such operations. The paper also evaluates the capabilities required for a successful maritime mission in the Strait of Hormuz, despite the increased complexity and risk present today.
3. **Introduction:** The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most critical maritime passages in the world for trade, representing a strategic chokepoint with direct implications for the global economy. In the current context, and with its use by Iran as a tool of pressure through the restriction of navigation and threats to global trade, freedom of navigation operations is required to ensure the continued flow of energy and commercial exchange.¹

The complex security environment surrounding maritime navigation in the strait, the ongoing military operations / tensions, and the absence of a political settlement call for a different operational approach to traditional models.²

4. **Background:**
 - a. Historically, freedom of navigation operations have been conducted to challenge excessive maritime claims. Since 1979, they have formed part of an institutionalized U.S. program, combining diplomatic protests against excessive maritime claims with military responses to challenge these claims at sea.³ The program focuses on the nature of the claim rather than the state itself, and in 2023 alone, the U.S. challenged numerous claims worldwide. The results of military intervention are unpredictable; the Gulf of Sidra off Libya in 1981, 1986, and 1989 serve as prominent examples, where U.S. naval and air operations begin as calculated actions but can escalate if met with military resistance.
 - b. From a legal perspective, the Strait of Hormuz is governed by the regime of transit passage under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This regime grants ships and aircraft the right of continuous and expeditious transit without interference and does not allow coastal states to impose politically selective restrictions. Under UNCLOS, any attempt to condition passage or impose prior authorization requirements raises direct legal concerns.⁴
 - c. During the current conflict, Iranian statements restricting passage to what it describes as “non-hostile” vessels, followed up with attacks on commercial ships, triggered a sharp decline in shipping activity since March 2026. This prompted international discussions on forming a maritime mission to secure navigation.

International organizations and major media outlets have reported large-scale disruptions to shipping and energy flows, as well as thousands of seafarers being stranded. The issue has evolved beyond a legal matter into a broader maritime security and global economic crisis.⁵

- d. The timeline for establishing international maritime coalitions is often prolonged. Evidence shows that such arrangements evolve gradually from existing security frameworks into more specialized structures as threats escalate. In the Gulf region, Combined Task Force (CTF-152) was established in 2004, followed by the development of the broader Combined Maritime Forces (CMF).⁶ In 2019, the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) was established, operating through its operational arm, CTF Sentinel, to safeguard navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. This was later reinforced by initiatives such as CTF-154 in 2023 to enhance regional readiness.⁷ In the current situation in the Strait of Hormuz, the trajectory has shifted from political statements to practical steps, with several states expressing their willingness to contribute, and the United Kingdom hosting international consultations involving approximately 40 countries to explore the formation of a maritime coalition focused on securing navigation and conducting mine countermeasure operations.
- e. However, the ability of such a coalition to operate remains closely tied to the open-ended nature of the crisis, as it can carry out escort and transit security missions for limited periods, and in specific security conditions. Such a force is likely to face challenges in sustaining long-term operations or operating in high threat environments due to resource constraints, declining political will, and differing rules of engagement among participating states. Moreover, the narrow geography of the strait and the prevalence of asymmetric threats risk continued escalation, beyond the defensive capabilities fielded by such a coalition.

5. **Key Points:**

- a. The United States plays a central role in upholding the principle of freedom of navigation globally, relying on a combination of legal, military, and diplomatic tools. Through the Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program established in 1970 Washington seeks to challenge maritime claims it considers inconsistent with international law and to reaffirm the right of passage in critical waterways. However, its role extends beyond asserting legal principles to building multinational security frameworks aimed at ensuring the continuity of global trade, particularly in strategically vital areas such as the Strait of Hormuz⁸.
- b. Maritime security missions take multiple forms, ranging from unilateral U.S. operations, particularly in the context of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), to broader multinational efforts aimed at securing shipping, escorting vessels, and providing deterrence. In the Gulf region, several key frameworks have emerged, including the International Maritime Security Construct (Operation Sentinel), Combined Maritime Forces, and EMASoH/AGENOR. These arrangements are characterized by a high degree of flexibility, enabling participating states to contribute at varying levels, whether through intelligence sharing, logistical support, or direct military deployment, without requiring uniformity or full-scale combat commitments from all members.⁹
- c. States are integrated into such missions through a coordinated process that begins at the political and legal level by defining the mission's objective, whether it is protecting navigation, escorting vessels, mine clearance, or deterrence, potentially extending to forcibly reopening the passage. This is followed by the operational level, which involves task distribution such as surveillance, command and control, air defense, convoy escort, countering fast attack craft, and securing ports and supply lines.¹⁰ Concurrently, diplomacy plays a crucial role in managing differences among participating states,

particularly regarding rules of engagement and the use of force.

- d. The recent use of the veto by Russia and China in the United Nations Security Council against the draft resolution submitted by Bahrain to reopen the Strait of Hormuz reflects a long-standing pattern in which these states frequently oppose U.S.-supported resolutions.¹¹ This aligns with the likelihood that major actors such as China, India, and Russia may choose to operate independently in order to preserve their strategic autonomy and advance their regional interests. Such an approach contributes to the emergence of multiple operational frameworks within the same theater, creating challenges in coordination and deconfliction. It may also weaken the unity of international efforts and further complicate operational management, particularly in escalation scenarios.¹²
- e. Given Iranian capabilities and their proven willingness to employ them, any serious FONOPs mission in the Strait of Hormuz requires advanced capabilities, including continuous surveillance and intelligence (ISR), escort vessels, maritime patrol aircraft, air and missile defense systems, electronic warfare capabilities, and specialized mine countermeasure assets. Additionally, there is a need to address asymmetric threats such as fast boats, unmanned aerial systems, and other non-traditional challenges that are particularly effective in the confined geography of the strait.¹³
- f. At the same time, such missions face significant constraints. Geographically, the strait is narrow and congested, increasing vulnerability to incidents or attacks. Politically and legally, there is a major distinction between a mission aimed at “protecting shipping” and one aimed at “forcing the strait open,” with the latter requiring broader legal and political justification and carrying higher risks of escalation. Furthermore, even limited engagements could quickly expand into wider conflict, imposing strict limitations on operational scope.¹⁴
- g. Rules of Engagement (ROE) and Use of Force (UoF) are among the most sensitive issues among participating states, differing in the level and conditions under which force may be used. Some states adopt more flexible rules that allow for preemptive deterrence, while others strictly limit the use of force to defend others or self-defense. This divergence leads to slower decision-making, the emergence of national caveats, and an uneven distribution of operational responsibilities, which may affect mission effectiveness, especially in high-tension environments.¹⁵

6. Analysis:

- a. It is essential to distinguish between freedom of navigation operations in their legal sense and broader maritime security operations aimed at ensuring commercial transit. FONOPs are typically limited and deliberate actions designed to challenge excessive claims, whereas the situation in the Strait of Hormuz resembles a strategic chokepoint crisis that requires sustained escort, mine clearance, continuous monitoring, and layered deterrence. Therefore, while FONOP precedents are useful legally and politically, they are insufficient as a comprehensive operational model in this case.¹⁶
- b. Current public statements by the U.S. government do not explicitly reflect a “cautious” approach, as they tend to emphasize deterrence, freedom of navigation, and readiness to respond to threats. However, caution appears to be the historic norm, through multinational frameworks, calibrated responses, and the avoidance of large-scale direct confrontation.¹⁷ The global economic importance of the Strait of Hormuz introduces a clear element of urgency, as disruptions to energy flows and maritime trade have immediate impacts on markets and supply chains. Consequently, the U.S. approach needs to balance timely action to secure navigation with the need to avoid escalation
- c. States participating in maritime missions differ in their strategic objectives, interpretations of international law, and levels of risk tolerance. Western states tend to adopt a more assertive approach to enforcing freedom of navigation, while others prefer a more cautious approach focused on de-

escalation and the protection of economic interests. These differences affect operational cohesion, as states may agree on the general objective of the mission but diverge on the scope of implementation and escalation.¹⁸

- d. The threat environment in the strait is largely asymmetric. Mines, fast attack craft, unmanned systems, and limited strikes aimed at intimidation rather than full-scale conflict can produce disproportionate economic effects. In such a narrow maritime corridor, even a small number of incidents can disrupt shipping, raise insurance costs, and create widespread economic impact, even without a formal closure of the strait.¹⁹ Thus, the core challenge lies not in declaring freedom of navigation, but in enabling its practical execution.
- e. The most realistic scenario is not a single decisive operation, but a phased approach that begins with enhancing maritime domain awareness and communication coordination, followed by removing immediate threats, escorting sensitive vessels, and eventually transitioning into a sustainable deterrence posture.²⁰ This phased approach reflects the complexity of the operational environment and the limitations of rapid solutions.
- f. The multinational coalition that is currently forming should be understood primarily as a political alignment rather than a fully operational naval force at this stage. While a growing number of states have expressed willingness to support efforts to secure navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, actual military commitments remain limited and uneven. Most nations privately acknowledge their reluctance to commit forces to a conflict of choice that was not of their making, and seek to avoid being labeled as belligerents through association with the U.S. Although many recognize the value of U.S. capabilities in ensuring maritime security, they prefer to limit their role to political support.²¹ As a result, the coalition is still in a planning phase, with current discussions focusing on a future defensive mission likely to begin with mine clearance, followed by the protection and escort of commercial vessels.

7. Conclusion:

- a. Freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a technical issue, but a global legal, strategic, and economic concern, as the strait constitutes a vital artery for energy and maritime trade. While historical precedents demonstrate that the U.S. and its partners possess experience in challenging excessive maritime claims, the current situation extends beyond traditional FONOPs and requires sustained protection of commercial shipping.
- b. Participation in such missions does not follow a single model, as states may contribute through naval forces, surveillance assets, liaison officers, intelligence support, or diplomatic roles, allowing for coalition-building despite differing levels of political commitment. However, achieving mission success requires extensive and multidimensional capabilities, and remains inherently conditional due to geographic constraints, political sensitivities, and the risks of escalation.
- c. The U.S. faces an asymmetric challenge in the Strait of Hormuz. Ensuring the safe passage of oil tankers requires a sustained and sophisticated military presence, either through an international coalition or unilateral efforts. In contrast, Iran only needs to threaten the closure of the strait and conduct limited, intermittent attacks to undermine confidence in freedom of navigation and create a persistent state of risk. This results in stricter insurance conditions and higher shipping costs, underscoring the need to pair freedom of navigation operations with an effective diplomatic track aimed at de-escalation.
- d. China and Russia have responded differently to the situation in the Strait of Hormuz; China heavily dependent on Gulf energy imports, has faced growing economic pressure and increased concern over the security of maritime trade routes, while Russia benefits from rising energy prices, and Iran gains

leverage from its strategic position in the strait. These overlapping incentives run counter to the economic stability of the United States and its allies.

- e. The success of such a coalition depends on a clear, defensive, and phased multinational mission supported by strong legal and political backing. It requires broad participation, adequate operational capabilities, and effective coordination with the maritime sector, alongside careful escalation management. While direct military action to open the Strait of Hormuz may bring short-term gains, it risks strategic escalation, making freedom of navigation achievable in theory but complex and politically costly in practice without credible deterrence and broad international consensus. Counterintuitively, inaction could be more effective than action.

Prepared by: Mohammad Alkharabsheh, LTC, JOR Army, CCIJ5-G (CSAG), 529-5077

For further information or to comment please contact the CSAG as follows:

COL Timothy K. Little, U.S. Division Chief, CSAG, CCIJ5, USCENTCOM COM

813-529-5055 NIPR timothy.k.little3.mil@mail.mil

SVOIP 302-529-6243 SIPR timothy.k.little3.mil@mail.smil.mil

Sources:

¹ Sarah El Safty, "Gulf importers race to reroute as Hormuz closure jolts supply chains," *Reuters*, March 16, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-importers-race-reroute-hormuz-closure-jolts-supply-chains-2026-03-16/> (accessed March 26, 2026).

² Michael Jansen, "Why Strait of Hormuz Military Escort Plan Is Fraught with Risk," *The Irish Times*, March 20, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/2026/03/20/why-strait-of-hormuz-military-escort-plan-is-fraught-with-risk/> (accessed March 26, 2026).

³ *U.S. Department of Defense*, "Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program," March 16, 2026, <https://policy.defense.gov/OUSSDP-Offices/FON/> (accessed March 26, 2026).

⁴ *United Nations*, "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)," December 10, 1982, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf (accessed March 26, 2026).

⁵ *International Maritime Organization*, "International Maritime Organization (IMO)," March 19, 2026, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-calls-for-safe-passage-framework-in-strait-of-hormuz.aspx> (accessed March 26, 2026).

⁶ *U.S. Naval Forces Central Command*, "Combined Task Force 152 Projects Multinational Presence in Arabian Gulf," March, 01, 2023, <https://www.usff.navy.mil/Press-Room/News-Stories/Article/3314441/combined-task-force-152-projects-multinational-presence-in-arabian-gulf/> (accessed April 4, 2026).

-
- ⁷ U.S. Navy. "Coalition Task Force Completes Exercise Sentinel Shield," April 18, 2022, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3001723/coalition-task-force-completes-exercise-sentinel-shield/> (accessed April 04, 2026).
- ⁸ Chow, Emily, Jeslyn Lerh, and Jonathan Saul, "Iran Conflict Disrupts Global Shipping as Tankers Are Stranded, Damaged," *Reuters*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/iran-conflict-disrupts-global-shipping-tankers-are-stranded-damaged-2026-03-02/> (accessed March 26, 2026).
- ⁹ Combined Maritime Forces, "About Combined Maritime Forces" <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/> (accessed March 27, 2026).
- ¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Allied Maritime Strategy," NATO, March 18, 2011, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm. <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/> (accessed March 27, 2026).
- ¹¹ David Brunnstrom, "China and Russia veto UN resolution on protecting Hormuz shipping," *Reuters*, April 8, 2026, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/china-vetoes-u-n-resolution-154721462.html> ,April 8, 2026.
- ¹² *Ahram Online*, "Explainer: How Major Powers Are Responding to U.S. Calls to Secure the Strait of Hormuz," March 16, 2026, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/564057.aspx>. (accessed March 28, 2026).
- ¹³ Anthony H. Cordesman and Grace Hwang, "Iran and the Changing Military Balance in the Gulf - Net Assessment Indicators," March 26, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-changing-military-balance-gulf-net-assessment-indicators>. (accessed March 28, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Mark Nevitt, "Legal and Operational Issues in the Strait of Hormuz: Transit Passage Under Fire," *Just Security*, March 15, 2026 <https://www.justsecurity.org/133996/legal-operational-strait-hormuz-transit-passage/> (accessed March 28, 2026).
- ¹⁵ Haley Fuller, "Hegseth's 'Stupid Rules of Engagement' Line and What ROE Actually Do," *Military.com*, March 06, 2026, <https://www.military.com/feature/2026/03/05/hegseths-stupid-rules-of-engagement-line-and-what-roe-actually-do.html> (accessed March 27, 2026).
- ¹⁶ Emma Curtis, Joely Virzi, and Caitlin Welsh, "Chokepoint: How the War with Iran Threatens Global Food Security," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 11, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chokepoint-how-war-iran-threatens-global-food-security> (accessed March 27, 2026).
- ¹⁷ Amir Azimi, "Iran's high-risk war strategy seems to centre on endurance and deterrence," *BBC.NEWS*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93jj3gz8x0o?accountMarketingPreferences=on> (accessed March 29, 2026).
- ¹⁸ Ashley Carnahan, "support amid rising Middle East tensions," *fox news*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/multiple-allies-decline-us-calls-strait-hormuz-support-amid-rising-middle-east-tensions> (accessed March 30, 2026).
- ¹⁹ Gavin Butler, Toby Mann, Patrick Jacksonand, "Why the Strait of Hormuz matters so much in the Iran war," *BBC.NEWS*, March 26, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c78n6p09pzno> (accessed March 28, 2026).
- ²⁰ Jonathan Saul, "US Navy tells shipping industry Hormuz escorts not possible for now," *Reuters*, March 10, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-navy-tells-shipping-industry-hormuz-escorts-not-possible-now-2026-03-10/> (accessed March 30, 2026).
- ²¹ Alexander Smith, "'Not our war': U.S. allies balk at Trump's Strait of Hormuz demands," *NBC news*, March 11, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/us-allies-respond-trump-strait-of-hormuz-demands-nato-iran-war-rcna263650> (accessed March 30, 2026).