

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:**Global Chokepoints and Energy Security: Implications for China and U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)**

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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:** Global Chokepoints and Energy Security: Implications for China and U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)
2. **Purpose:** Provide an assessment of major global maritime chokepoints, their role in sustaining international energy flows, and China's dependence on these routes. Additionally, evaluate how these dynamics shape vulnerabilities in China's energy security posture and outlines the operational implications for U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), within contested maritime environments.
3. **Introduction:**
 - a. Global energy supply chains depend on a limited number of maritime chokepoints that connect hydrocarbon-producing regions to global markets. These chokepoints serve as critical nodes within an interconnected system in which disruptions in a single location can generate domino effects across multiple regions.¹
 - b. A substantial percentage of globally traded oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) originates in the Middle East and transits narrow waterways to reach consumer markets in Asia and Europe. The concentration of energy flows through these corridors creates systemic risk, as localized disruptions can affect global pricing, cost of insurance, supply availability, and economic stability.²
 - c. Beyond their economic importance, maritime chokepoints possess significant military and geopolitical importance. Controlling, monitoring, or disruption of these routes shape the operational environment, influence force posture decisions, and affect broader geopolitical competition. (See Annex A for detailed analysis)
4. **China's Energy Dependence and Structural Vulnerabilities:**
 - a. China remains the world's largest importer of crude oil, relying heavily on external energy supplies to sustain economic growth, industrial production, and military modernization.³ Despite expanding renewable and nuclear energy capacity, petroleum remains essential to manufacturing, aviation, shipping, and defense. Long-term projections suggest that China

will remain about 70 percent dependent on imported crude oil through at least 2030, highlighting the enduring nature of these vulnerabilities.⁴

- b. Approximately 52–56 percent of China’s oil imports originate from the Middle East with key suppliers including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran.⁵ These imports transit maritime routes through critical chokepoints within USCENTCOM’s AOR, primarily the Strait of Hormuz (SoH) and the Bab el-Mandeb (BAM).
- c. This layered exposure creates a critical structural vulnerability, whereby disruptions at the source or along transit corridors can rapidly disrupt national energy availability. The Strait of Malacca represents the clearest manifestation of this vulnerability. About 75-80 per cent of China’s seaborne crude imports transit this narrow corridor, a volume difficult to mitigate through alternative routes or overland transportation networks.⁶
- d. This geographic bottleneck creates a strategic paradox: although China has significantly expanded its blue-water naval capabilities, it has neither developed nor sought to establish the global force posture and alliance and partnership network required to independently secure its critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs). China remains a beneficiary of the U.S.-led maritime security architecture that underpins the stability of these vital trade routes.
- e. This vulnerability directly drives Beijing’s broader strategic behavior, including its overseas port investments, rapid naval modernization, targeted diplomatic engagement in the Gulf, and a growing blue-water naval presence.

5. China’s Mitigation Strategies:

- a. China has implemented multiple measures to reduce exposure to external shocks and maritime disruption. Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) have expanded significantly, with total capacity estimated at approximately 1.3–1.4 billion barrels, providing a temporary buffer against supply interruptions.⁷
- b. Beijing has pursued diversification strategies by expanding its supplier base, increasing imports of LNG, and developing overland energy corridors linking China to Russia and Central Asia. Infrastructure projects associated with the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, and broader China–Central Asia pipeline networks are intended to reduce excessive dependence on maritime transportation routes.⁸ While these initiatives enhance resilience, they do not eliminate China’s underlying dependence on maritime chokepoints.
- c. China has heavily invested in overseas infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, including ports, logistics hubs, rail systems, and maritime facilities in locations such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti.⁹ Concurrently, the rapid modernization and blue-water expansion of the People’s Liberation Army Navy reflect Beijing’s intent to develop forward power-projection capabilities to protect critical SLOCs.
- d. Despite these efforts, overland routes and alternative infrastructure cannot match the economic efficiency, scalability, or transport capacity of maritime shipping. China’s current initiatives primarily enhance tactical resilience and provide short-term buffers rather than

fundamentally eliminating the country's structural dependence on global maritime chokepoints.

6. Assessment:

- a. China has strengthened its ability to absorb short-term disruptions through strategic stockpiling, supplier diversification, overseas infrastructure investment, and naval modernization. While these initiatives reduce vulnerability to isolated shocks, they do not fundamentally alter the geographic realities underpinning China's energy dependence.
- b. China remains structurally dependent on Middle Eastern energy transiting the SoH and BAM, keeping USCENTCOM's AOR central to Beijing's long-term energy security calculus.
- c. China's principal vulnerability is its continued reliance on contested maritime corridors vulnerable to coercion, instability, proxy attacks, piracy, and military conflict. With many chokepoints outside Beijing's direct military control, China remains exposed to disruptions that could affect industrial production, transportation networks, financial markets, and domestic stability.
- d. This creates a broader strategic dilemma: Beijing seeks to challenge elements of the U.S.-led international order while simultaneously relying on the maritime security architecture supported by the U.S. and allied naval presence.
- e. Beijing's expanding presence near critical SLOCs should be understood as a strategic effort to reduce its vulnerability to maritime coercion and external pressure. Simultaneously, increased Russian exports and expanded overland energy corridors have increased China's supply redundancy. As a result, localized maritime disruptions would likely cause economic costs and logistical challenges rather than an immediate strategic crisis.
- f. For USCENTCOM, these dynamics elevate maritime security operations beyond traditional regional deterrence missions. Actions in the Gulf and Red Sea directly effects global commerce, reinforce alliance confidence, and the shape broader strategic competition between the U. S. and China. Securing these SLOCs therefore not only supports regional stability, but also the resilience of the global economic system and the U.S. leadership and credibility.

7. Conclusions:

- a. Global energy markets and maritime commerce remain heavily dependent on strategic chokepoints within USCENTCOM's AOR, particularly The Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb.
- b. China's continued dependence on imported energy and maritime transport creates enduring structural vulnerabilities. Although Beijing has strengthened resilience to short-term disruptions, it remains dependent on SLOCs that are vulnerable to instability, coercion, and conflict.
- c. Recent tensions in the Strait of Hormuz illustrate how disruptions at a single maritime chokepoint can generate significant effects on global energy markets, commercial shipping, and broader economic stability, while also highlighting China's limited ability to independently shape regional security dynamics.

- d. These dynamics extend beyond economics. In an era of great-power competition, maritime energy security increasingly influences military planning, alliances, and long-term geopolitical strategy. As a result, maritime security operations within USCENTCOM's AOR have moved beyond localized stabilization missions and now possibly forming a key component of U.S.-China strategic competition.
- e. For the United States, and USCENTCOM in particular, protecting commercial shipping, preserving freedom of navigation, and deterring regional aggression support both global economic stability and U.S. strategic influence. Securing maritime access through the Gulf and Red Sea therefore has implications beyond regional security, affecting global trade flows, China's long-term strategic resilience, and the broader balance of international power.
- f. Although diversification, alternative routes, and changing energy flows may reduce dependence on individual maritime chokepoints, maritime commerce remains fundamental to global trade, especially energy transportation. With more than 80 percent of global trade moving by sea and approximately 90 percent of China's crude oil imports arriving by sea (2024), the security of strategic chokepoints will remain central to geopolitical influence and international security. USCENTCOM's maritime security operations will continue to carry strategic importance beyond the Middle East, supporting regional stability while preserving strategic advantages in long-term competition with China.
- g. China's maritime energy dependence remains a vulnerability, but its strategic value as leverage may decline over time. Although China's reliance on maritime energy imports creates a persistent structural weakness, a prolonged conflict would likely encourage Beijing to accelerate efforts to reduce this exposure through energy diversification, expanded overland supply routes, strategic stockpiling, and the development of a more capable expeditionary naval force. These adaptations could gradually reduce the extent to which maritime dependence constrains Chinese decision-making.
- h. The United States should view China's maritime dependence as a declining rather than permanent source of strategic leverage. Maintaining credible naval capabilities, securing key maritime chokepoints, and strengthening allied maritime security partnerships will remain essential to preserving freedom of navigation and sustaining U.S. strategic influence in an increasingly contested security environment.

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ANNEX A



(The imagery is AI-generated, drawing from a wide variety of information sources).

Sources:

¹ Verschuur, Jasper, Johannes Lumma, and Jim W. Hall. "Systemic Impacts of Disruptions at Maritime Chokepoints." *Nature Communications* 16 (2025): Article 10421. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-65403-w> (accessed May 12, 2026)

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