

Hormuz Is Not a Problem of Power; It Is a Problem of Leadership

A Narrow Coalition for Free and Uncoerced Passage Through the Strait

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The Strait of Hormuz is being held hostage not because the world lacks the power to keep it open, but because no one has organized that power around a clear and limited objective. The countries that depend on the strait collectively possess overwhelming economic, diplomatic, and military strength. Yet commercial shipping remains vulnerable to attack, coercion, disruption, and [demands](#) for payment. The failure is not one of capability. It is a failure of leadership and coordination. [Recent proposals](#) for shared administration of the Strait of Hormuz suggest that the search for institutional solutions has begun. An additional question deserves attention: how might such an institution evolve over time?

The obvious temptation is to treat Hormuz as one part of the entire Iran problem: nuclear enrichment, Hezbollah, Israel, sanctions, reconstruction, and the future of the Iranian regime. That approach virtually guarantees paralysis. Major powers have different relationships with Iran and different tolerances for military action.

But they do not need to agree on Iran. They need to agree on Hormuz.

The operational requirement should be stated with almost mathematical simplicity: commercial vessels must be able to transit the Strait of Hormuz safely, freely, and without attack, coercion, discriminatory restriction, or unilateral tolls imposed by any state or entity. Nothing more should be included in the initial objective.

The coalition need not require agreement on regime change, nuclear enrichment, Hezbollah, Israel, sanctions, reconstruction, proxy warfare, or the future shape of the Middle East. Precisely because these matters are important, deeply contested, and capable of consuming every negotiation, they must remain outside this agreement. The coalition need not solve the Middle East. It need only keep one international waterway open.

That narrowness is the proposal's greatest strength. An anti-Iran coalition would divide many countries whose cooperation is needed. A coalition protecting an international waterway rests on broader ground. States may disagree profoundly about geopolitics while sharing an interest in ships not being attacked, detained, diverted, or forced to pay politically imposed tolls.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are natural candidates to provide regional political leadership. Both have a major stake in Gulf stability and substantial diplomatic influence. Together they could organize a regional core that is not simply an extension of Washington. The United States would remain indispensable for military capability, intelligence, logistics, and deterrence. European and Asian powers could participate at varying levels, while major importers such as India, Japan, South Korea, and China could lend diplomatic and economic weight without joining military operations.

Russia could also be invited to endorse the narrow principle, though its incentives differ. Higher oil prices may [benefit](#) Moscow, but uncontrolled regional war and prolonged disruption do not. The coalition need not share the same motive; only the same limited rule.

Participation need not be identical. Some states might contribute naval forces; others could provide intelligence, logistics, diplomatic backing, insurance mechanisms, economic measures, or public endorsement. But every significant participant should contribute something meaningful.

The coalition would need predictable consequences. If shipping is attacked, the response cannot depend on improvised debate or an individual leader's mood. States should agree in advance on graduated diplomatic, economic, and, where necessary, military consequences directed at those responsible. Predictability strengthens deterrence because the likely cost is known beforehand.

The framework must also anticipate evasion: harassment, selective inspections, ambiguous proxy action, cyber interference, unofficial fees, or side arrangements with selected countries. Iran may dispute attribution or exploit different definitions of coercion. The coalition therefore needs agreed definitions, evidentiary thresholds, response bands, and a standing attribution process. This is a framework, not an operational manual, but every incident cannot reopen the entire bargain.

The coordinating authority will itself become a target. Iran will try to inject uncertainty, portray it as an American instrument, challenge its evidence, and encourage contradictory statements. The authority should communicate and implement decisions already agreed by participating states, not exercise unchecked power. Yet no single member should be able to paralyze the process by demanding unanimity after every incident.

Iran must have a clear off-ramp. The purpose is not punishment for its own sake, destruction of Iran, or regime change disguised as maritime security. If Iran ceases attacks and coercive interference, measures tied directly to enforcing free passage should stop or be suspended under agreed terms.

Iran should also recognize that inflammatory rhetoric is not cost-free. Threats against other countries or their leaders, triumphalist claims of control, and public celebration of disruption make compromise politically harder and can help create the very coalition Tehran wishes to prevent.

No participating state or individual leader should be able to dilute, reinterpret, expand, or bargain away the coalition's position unilaterally. Once the objective and enforcement mechanism are established, the coalition must speak through an authorized coordinating structure. An improvised statement, social-media post, bilateral side deal, or sudden change in terms by one government should not supersede the common position.

This is a basic requirement of credibility, not merely a criticism of one president or country. An adversary facing inconsistent messages will probe for divisions and search for the most favorable interpretation. A coalition whose policy can change overnight is only a collection of countries temporarily standing near one another.

The United States presents both the greatest opportunity and the greatest difficulty. No other country can so readily provide the military backbone. Yet American policy must be consistent enough for others to risk joining. If the coalition's leading member later weakens its position unilaterally, it will damage more than one negotiation; it will discourage trust in similar arrangements in the future.

Political reality also matters. Powerful leaders want credit, and there is no reason to deny it when granting credit helps achieve the objective. A U.S. president who succeeds in bringing together countries that often disagree—Arab states, Europeans, Asian importers, and maritime powers—to protect one of the [world's most important waterways](#) should receive substantial credit. Legacy can become part of the mechanism that preserves consistency: the leader who builds such a coalition should understand that history will also identify who preserved it and who broke it.

The central fact remains striking. Iran is economically strained and has suffered military pressure, yet it can still impose costs on much of the world through geography and force. Meanwhile, countries with vastly greater aggregate power issue separate statements, pursue separate negotiations, and wait for someone else to organize the response.

The solution need not begin with a grand settlement of the Middle East. It can begin with one sentence: commercial vessels shall transit the Strait of Hormuz safely, freely, and without coercion by any state or entity. Build the broadest feasible coalition around that requirement. Establish predictable consequences and a clear off-ramp. Give an authorized coordinating mechanism the power to speak for the coalition. Keep every other dispute outside the framework. And once the common position is agreed, do not allow any single country or leader to bargain it away.

The concept is simple. The political obstacles are formidable. But if the world fails to act, future historians should not conclude that no alternative was visible. The problem was understood, the collective power existed, and a narrower path was available. What was missing was the leadership to organize it.